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Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality

THE WISDOM OF THE CROSS

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PREFACE

This study contains notes given to the students of the Lombard Pastoral institute who followed the course on the “Wisdom of the Cross” in the Spirituality Section. Therefore they are quite concise and do not pretend to give an exhaustive development of the theme.

The purpose of the course is to show pastoral ministers how to move “devotion to the Passion of Jesus” out of its restricted ambit of pious and consoling practice toward the numberless “crucified” of daily life.

The wisdom of the cross is essential for a correct vision of christian life in all its dimensions. And this wisdom does not sadden the one who adopts it; rather it enables one to glory in it because the wisdom of the cross provides a way to face courageously the most problematic situations in which the christian finds himself in a secularized world.

Reflection on the wisdom of the cross continues. We hope that the readers of this study can also contribute to this reflection, especially by using the bibliography given here in the notes and that which will appear in the future.

I. RETURN TO THE CROSS

How This Revival Came to Light

The period corresponding approximately from the mid-fifties to the end of the sixties showed an evident reaction in Christian thought against what was taken to be an excessive concentration on the cross in Catholic theology and spirituality. An important theological work of F. X. Durrwell, CSSR "The Resurrection" (New York, 1960), reversed this tendency. The distinct salvific role of the Resurrection, strongly proposed, was not so peacefully accepted,⁽¹⁾ though it certainly reshaped that of the cross.

Wisdom, balance and deep feeling for tradition led Vatican II to aim at a synthesis of the Passion, Death and Resurrection as the unique Paschal Mystery, perennially present in the Church. "The work of human redemption and the perfect glorification of God...has been carried out by Christ the Lord, especially in the paschal mystery of his blessed Passion, Resurrection from the dead and glorious Ascension, by which mystery, 'dying he destroyed our death and rising he has restored our life'" (Easter Preface). (2)

But, in fact, the conciliar tendency was rather strikingly optimistic (like John XXIII who had started it) and the "paschal" tone predominated. The shift in the "world" view is a sign of this – a world which "has been freed from the slavery of sin by Christ, who was crucified and rose in order to break the stranglehold of the evil one..."⁽³⁾

The whole atmosphere seethed with a spirituality and a pastoral theology that in the past seemed to have generated a morbid, "sad" mysticism and an exaggerated resignation of the people to failure and permanent situations of misery and injustice. However, very soon this neo-triumphalist resurrectionism appeared premature, to say the least. The post-Conciliar Church had to face up to a wave of secularization more violent than ever before. Pseudo-theological arguments to prove that "God is dead" were attempted. Meanwhile, all the optimistic illusions on the socio-political level faded away. The more or less millenarian revolutionaries, such as "advocates" of the affluent society had to stand up in their turn to the unexpected discovery that, thanks especially to the petrol war, the years of ready abundance were over.

So, very significantly, theological fashion turned (very clearly in Moltmann's work) from the theme of hope to that of the cross. Moltmann's "Theology of Hope" dates back to 1964. He makes no secret of the inspiration derived from the work of the atheist-communist philosopher Ernst Bloch's "The Principle of Hope." There is a very strong tension towards the future: for the author, a convinced Protestant, this future is transcendent and eternal. But many more readers than expected linked up themes that brought this theology down to our present life.

However, already in 1972, Moltmann wrote in Concilium of a "Crucified God" and he published a book of the same name with the significant subtitle, "The Cross of Christ, as the foundation and criticism of Christian Theology." In the preface he tells us how the new depressing times reminded him of those days when he was studying theology immediately after the war, in the midst of a ruined Germany. No other theology was possible but that of the cross.

Thus, the seventies were marked by this rebirth of theological and spiritual reflection on the theme of the cross. A confirmation of this was given at the International Congress on WISDOM

OF THE CROSS TODAY, held in Rome in 1975, to mark the second centenary of the death of St. Paul of the Cross, founder of the Passionists. The Acts of the Congress have been published in three large volumes. The wealth of their contents and the interest aroused confirm that “Christ Himself has come to show us that the Cross in God’s plan is neither despair nor resignation, but hope, security and instrument of salvation” (Opening Address of Father Sebastian Camera, Vicar General of the Passionists).

It is difficult to find one’s way through the abundance of printed material, but the foundation of the Review “STAUROS”, founded specifically to promote study on this theme, published a bibliography which had 1,524 titles for 1972-73; 2,573 titles for 1974-75; 2,607 titles for 1976-77, and 2,415 titles for 1978-79.

A Deep Experience of Theological Renewal

Protestant theology and Catholic research abound in exegetical, patristic, dogmatic, spiritual and pastoral studies on the Cross. There is also an ecumenical trend towards the Death of Christ as cause of our salvation and “*spes unica*” for our life. According to M. Flick, it is a phenomenon of what he calls “pendularism” that demonstrates the validity of that law of dogmatic development by which, when one facet of revelation is explained, the others do not lose their significance, but, according to the requirements of correlation, appear in fresh light that stimulates research.⁽⁴⁾ It seems to us, as Moltmann says, that the theology of the Cross contains the response to a much deeper need of Christian life in our day.

In the challenge of atheistic secularism he saw a mortal danger that Christianity might lose its identity or become irrelevant. The advancing wave of secularism has led many to insist so much on the premises of “*Gaudium et Spes*”, with regard to dialogue with the world, as to become almost identical with it. Christianity was held to be only “existence-for-others”, and theological transcendence was put as much as possible in parentheses so that theology became anthropology. For many leftists it was considered necessary to carry a standard of denial of anything specifically Christian in all earthly problems. Consequently the question, “What’s the use of being a Christian?” The obvious answer, given by many, especially young people, was to leave the Church. Irrelevance leads to loss of identity.

At the opposite pole was the ecclesiastical institution. Insisting on the dogmatic and disciplinary affirmation of Christian identity, it was exposed to becoming more and more marginal and irrelevant to the dynamics of history. The present decline is the last trailing sign of this privatization of the religious fact. One gets the impression that many seem resigned to an irrelevant identity and take refuge by flight or imprisonment in some tiny ghetto.

While awaiting a mature synthesis, in many different ways, although not always coherent among themselves and therefore still in a fluid state, the theology of the cross intends to retrieve both identity and relevance. Undoubtedly, to base one’s teaching on the “foolishness” of the Cross of Jesus is to have the courage to bring the argument back to the very origins of evangelization. There is nothing here of resignation or passivity. It is so thoroughly affirmed that it serves as a basis of construction for the very identity of the true God against every form of atheism. The man who rose again after being so quickly declared dead is the Crucified God, and every other image of the Father disappears for good. The relevance of the new theology intends

to be exercised also and precisely in the building of the world. The Catholic theologian, John B. Metz, in particular, has spoken to us of “the provocative memory of the Passion.”(5)

Wisdom, Rather Than Theology: Why?

In this short course, it is impossible to give a complete view of these new trends, neither can we ignore new data introducing fresh directions that the eighties have brought us. History goes on its increasingly rapid way. We prefer to remain within the pastoral field which is ours.

Preference for the term “wisdom” over “theology” indicates the nature of the course and its implications. We shall go directly to the sources of christian thought, that is, the Apostle Paul. After calling “the language of the cross” ‘foolishness’, he boldly affirms that Christ Crucified is the “Wisdom of God” (I Cor. 1:18,23ff). For reflection on Christ’s death was from the beginning a preoccupation of the Christian community’s intellectual life.

The followers of Jesus were able to resolve the problem of the scandal of the cross only in the light of Scripture: “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Lk. 24:26). The results of this search, already present in New Testament writings, brought out the central salvific function of the cross according to God’s sapiential plan.

Theological reasoning becomes relative in the face of this intuition. For theology applies reason to faith in order to illustrate, develop and defend the data of revelation. It is a marvelous effort, but always ambiguous. Today these limitations have become clear. The tool of reason applied to faith is used by every theologian within the culture of their times. The Fathers moved in a context of Platonic thought. The dramatic innovation of Thomas Aquinas was to introduce Aristotelian thought into the stronghold of theology. Whether we like it or not, it is always a “reductive” process compared to the original data which are by definition, divine, even if expressed in the revealed sources as “the marvelous condescension of eternal wisdom.”(6)

Theologians are ready to admit that their language – even that of dogmatic statements of the Magisterium, do not exhaust the divine mystery. Meanwhile they are, in fact, considered to be adequate and often, when applied to daily life, there is a further reduction that sometimes ends in a blind alley, provoking reactions of rejection. This is very clear today, when a certain leading culture (Marxist or radical) is so completely atheistic that it cannot be used as a theological tool and when matters of faith cannot be expressed with sufficient “inculturation”. Again this is verifiable simply because of the pluralism of cultures that make the very existence of a single theology problematic.

Hence, one then prefers to turn to wisdom. According to the Council: “There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that were being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts.(7) It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience...” (Dei Verbum 8). Wisdom is the “pneumatic” or spiritual understanding of scripture which reveals the “mystery”, that is, the way the salvific will of God acts in the hiddenness of historical events.(8)

If we have to illustrate revelation by reason, the saint can do it better than the learned man. The true Fathers and Doctors of the Church are the Saints. Our course is an attempt at a fresh

evaluation of sapiential contemplation so that it might serve as a basis for further doctrinal and pastoral development.

II. THE CROSS AS SAPIENTIAL SYMBOL

Christian faith has always made the cross its principal symbol and has proclaimed it everywhere. Even though excessive emphasis has lessened its impact on human consciences, it retains its importance. Its wealth of meaning goes far beyond even the biblical religion. “The first stage in a theology of the cross is to discover the true meaning which this widespread symbol has for the believer.”(1) Undoubtedly, sapiential contemplation is nourished by the mysterious archetypes carved in human consciousness (or subconsciousness); but then one has to go beyond them. The danger of building up a more or less esoteric “gnosis” in place of a pilgrimage of faith is always present.

Cosmic Symbolism Of The Cross

According to Jung, the simple diagram of two intersecting lines at right angles has been with mankind from the Stone Age and by its very nature introduces a transcendental meaning. From earliest times this sign was given the double significance of death and life. Perhaps the one line cutting through the other makes one think of a contrary tendency, a broken life. Or maybe it evokes the image of a stylized man...(2)

Rene Guenon has written an extensive work on “The Symbolism of the Cross.”(3) He is convinced that the cross is a universal symbolic idea that is expressed analogically in the most unlikely visions of the world. For instance, in those of the Hebrew, Hindu, Taoist, Chinese and Gnostic religious traditions. In all of these the cross expresses the realization of the whole being. The center of the cross is “the point where all oppositions are reconciled and to which they turn.” (4) The wise man, detached from all things, has to reach that center and so become “lord of all things because he has passed beyond all oppositions coming from multiplicity and so nothing can touch him anymore.”(5)

Another classical symbol is connected with the letter TAU(+) which is found in the Phoenician and Hebrew alphabets and later in the Greek. Being the last letter in the alphabet it could easily signify perfection, fulfillment. The magic of letters lingered on the TAU as on a salvific sign; in Ezechiel’s vision those who escaped the abominations of Jerusalem were signed with it on their foreheads and so were spared from destruction (Ez.9:4). (6)

The Fathers saw another symbol of the cross in a ship’s mast. Greek mythology tells of Ulysses escaping the sirens’ lures by being bound to a mast. “The mast-cross comparison is certainly only Christian. On it the allegory of Ulysses as model of wisdom has been superposed...The cunning of the wise Ulysses is an example of sublime wisdom possible to only a few Christians...Maximus of Turin goes so far as to see in Ulysses bound to the ship’s mast the figure of Christ crucified...”(7)

Myths had already reached philosophy with Plato, who in “Timaeus” states that the demiurge divides the soul of the world in the form of a cross; the cross reaches heaven to indicate the eternal Word (Logos); to left and right it chases the enemies from chaos. The lower section is deeply rooted and joins what is below with what is above; the cross, in fact, takes on the value of

basic principle and cohesion for the cosmos. These speculations were later entirely taken over by the gnostics.(8)

Simone Weil also saw in Plato a precursor of the wisdom of the cross, when he tries to explain the limited beings from the unlimited one. “In God there has to be unity between the principle, creating and ordering limitation, and inert matter, which is indetermination...When God creates he renounces being everything; he gives over a little being to something other than himself. Creation is renunciation out of love... The only true response is to accept the possibility of being destroyed. Where there is consent to necessity that is complete, authentic and unconditional, there is participation in the cross of Christ.”(9)

These and many other comparisons are often very interesting and could seem pedagogically useful; but we think it better to avoid them. One could become locked up in them. If there is no reference to the concrete life of Jesus of Nazareth, myths and philosophies may say too much or too little. Too much when they reduce God to silence so as to bring out only His unlimited love. Too little when either they fail to recognize the full weight of human existence, or make so much of anthropological data as to transfer them improperly to divinity.(10)

Anguish, Groans And Cries In The Old Testament

Very different is the approach of thought revealed in the Old Testament. The scandal of suffering – especially of the just man – has never been minimized. The disciples’ sorrowful surprise before the cross shows that for them it contained nothing salvific.

The Hebrew mentality is well depicted in the jeers of the high priests and scribes at the agonizing Christ, “Let Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (Mk. 15:32). They echo the Book of Wisdom: “...If the just man is God’s son, God will stretch out a hand to him and save him from the clutches of his enemies...”(Wisdom 2:18).

Although it is difficult to distinguish the various levels of Hebrew tradition that accumulated in the Old Testament, “we could point out the probability of a primitive concept close to that of the friends of Job, that then developed, on the one hand, extending the horizon of retribution to the next life, and on the other, the deepening experience of innocent suffering, without this fact having received a universal, fully satisfying solution”.(11)

For the primitive mentality, suffering, was above all a punishment inflicted by the divinity on those who even unknowingly had offended him. In the first chapter of Genesis the strict relationship between crime and punishment is affirmed in various ways. The idea of a “corporate personality” in which the individual practically disappeared for the good of the whole people was fairly peacefully accepted. Then the people were in a way summed up in the head or ruler, for good or ill. Biblical research has concluded that universal suffering is connected with the sin of the head of humanity, and that the misfortunes of the chosen people can be connected with the sin of the ruler.

But during the Babylonian exile, about the time of Ezechiel, an important change took place. Personal responsibility took first place with regard to the solidarity of the people. “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge. ...As I live, says the Lord God,

this proverb shall never again be used in Israel...The soul that sins shall die...A son shall not share a father's guilt, nor a father his son's. The righteous man shall reap the fruit of his own righteousness, and the wicked man the fruit of his own wickedness"(Ez. 18:2,20). It is easy to see how, from that moment, the scandal of the innocent man's suffering became still more unbearable.

To be acceptable, the further idea – in the prologue and epilogue of Job – that God tried his friends through suffering, supposes that before the end of their lives, these friends would be fully rewarded. "Sheol cannot confess thee, death cannot praise thee, nor can they who go down to the abyss hope for thy truth"(Is. 38:18). "It is not the dead who praise the Lord, nor those who go down into silence..."(Ps. 119:17) "But we, the living bless the Lord..."

The terrible experience shortly before Christ's coming, especially the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanius, told in the Book of Maccabees, caused a fresh development of Hebrew thought. If, in spite of all, the just man remains faithful to his God, he will not be without his reward, even if he die unjustly. "But the just live forever; their reward is in the Lord's keeping, and the Most High has them in his care, therefore royal splendor shall be theirs, and a fair diadem from the Lord himself."(Wisdom 5:15)

But this should not be taken to be the general mentality of the christian today. Even if contact with Hellenism could promote the acceptance of a happy destiny for the "soul" alone, the Jews remained firmly attached to the idea of overcoming suffering completely. Hence, there is "apocalyptic" hope; the great tribulations of the faithful are compared to the pains of childbirth and foretell the coming of the Messiah who will restore (with the resurrection of the just) the joyful reign of God on earth. There may be a trace of this mentality in Revelations 20:4 (the martyrs rising first and reigning for a thousand years), even if John has spiritualized the theme.

Therefore, we should not be too quick to see the wisdom of the cross prefigured also in the belief – not universally accepted even at the time of Christ – that the sufferings of the just are "messianic". For it is a matter of global understanding of Messianism, and precisely on this point, that Christ will sweep away all the preceding distress: his is new wine in new wineskins (cfr. Mark 2:22).

If Ideologies Eliminate the Cross, Better Sweep Them Away

The Christ-event is clear: his religious vision did not fit in at all with the dominant views of his people. It seems, therefore, better not to try and force harmonizations "lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power"(I Cor. 1:17; cfr. Gal. 5:11). The philosophies of modern thought which denature the cross are, in a certain sense, more dangerous than those which more openly reject it, thus keeping open the big question about the meaning it can have or even whether it can have a meaning.

We have a typical example of an acceptance and then of a rejection of the cross of Christ in Hegelian philosophy in which the cross "enters theologically into the normal logic of the constitution of things and of the spirit."(12) For a "characteristic trait of Hegelian dialectics is the 'immeasurable power of the negative' and its historic-dialectical force, 'flowering and fading are eternally connected', in the same way as the tree of the cross."(13)

The historic event of Calvary is here lost in the “eternal” divine. “God takes shape in the community only through the sufferings of his renunciation of the ‘in himself’: the absolute, the eternal, etc., are fully submissive to becoming man, to accepting the event, the death and life of things.”(14) Hegel’s attempt to rationalize Christianity should be rejected as spurious; he has imprisoned the message inflexibly into a system, with nominally christian language which has lost its meaning. Basically Hegelian speculation is a philosophical postulate (the Idea, Reason, Thought, Absolute Spirit) and his hermeneutical principle, i.e., the dialectic of contraries, is also essentially philosophical.

An example of recent philosophies which reject the cross is that of Nietzsche, who opposes everything that takes its meaning from the cross, by his rebellious, reciprocating, radical rejection. This rejection is based on the whole foundation of his entire system, with its will-to-power as its decisive sign. His Antichrist declares that “compassion is the praxis of nihilism.”(15) He holds that, instead of a simple preaching of non-violence, the christian system has betrayed Jesus’ message: Paul brought it back into pagan sacralization by speaking of the sacrifice of expiation for sin. In any case, the cross is seen as an insuperable obstacle to man’s future development; if it adopts the “patientia crucis” all militant optimism advancing towards the frontiers of the kingdom is extinguished irreparably.

The Marxist, Ernst Bloch, a very different kind of thinker, proceeds along the same lines and accuses Paul of having distorted the message of Jesus of Nazareth. In Bloch’s words, “subjectively, Jesus considered himself the Messiah in the most traditional sense. The proclamation to the oppressed and indigent was full of a socio-nazireo-prophetic impulse rather than a death-wish or an exalted form of spiritual consolation...Jesus’ faith that he was the leader of a new era was so certain that it only abandoned him on the cross... in the totally concrete desperate cry: ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’ Only someone who sees his work fade away could give such a cry...”(16) “Paul, formerly an outsider to the primitive christian community, was the one to suggest the paradox...Jesus is not the Messiah in spite of the cross, but precisely because of the cross...”(17) Bloch, who visualizes a red thread of subversion running throughout the whole Bible, continually overruled by interpolations of those who held the sacred power...” It “was impeded for the last time through the myth of the sacrificed Lamb, so that, the ‘patience of the cross’, so well-suited to being recommended to the oppressed and so pleasant for the oppressors, was thus sanctioned.”(18)

In the above-mentioned book Bloch uses a motto taken from the New Testament: “who sees me sees the Father.” Obvious paradox: Jesus’ mission was to eliminate the old God, putting man in his place. Something similar comes from a psycho-analytic reading of Scripture. In Freudian terms, man’s salvation is above all, salvation from death which comes through the “death of the Father,” whose privileges are seized, thereby producing a guilt complex. “The genius of Christianity would then be to have succeeded through Christ’s death and resurrection in killing the Father, i.e., liberating from the law and the consequences of its transgression, among which were death, its just punishment, and the carrying over the victory onto the Father. Not, however, without being cleared from an implied debt with death. Christianity is reconciled with the Father, but thereby dethroning and dispossessing the ancient God, the Father-God, who thus takes second rank; Christ his Son steps into his place...”(19)

Modern ideologies will never bring an answer to the deep, anguishing questions of mankind about the cross. The price they ask – atheism – cannot be paid. Contemporary Western thought

rejects the cross as praxis as being contrary to a permissive and consumer society. It rejects it as theory because incapable of introducing the wisdom of the cross into the closed and absolutizing systems – psychological, sociological, philosophical – that dominate the thought and experience of today’s civilization. It is a face-to-face challenge and it is of capital importance to start off at the correct angle to give credibility to the wisdom of the cross. We hold that the reawakening of this wisdom, as it has appeared during the last years, is accompanied precisely with a fresh perception of its authenticity. This does not come from myths nor sophisticated ideological constructions, but directly from the historical experience of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we approach with greater trust, thanks to critical tools available, but still more thanks to the entry of the living Jesus into our contemporary world, a work he is doing precisely for those who are nearest to Him on the cross. As Edith Stein wrote: “The wisdom of the cross can be acquired only if one experiences personally the whole weight of the cross.”

III. WHAT JESUS THOUGHT OF HIS CROSS

In order to reach the wisdom of the cross, that is, its ultimate meaning for every person of faith today, we intend to inquire into the meaning of the cross for the pre-paschal Jesus, in spite of all the problems it poses. We shall certainly not be able to take up an independent position by exhausting the question ourselves, but shall simply present the results of recent studies that are more and more reassuring.

At least on the Catholic side these seem to have come to a positive equilibrium between rationalistic skepticism and ingenuous fideism.

It is widely held among people of little or no faith that it can be scientifically proven that ecclesial theology is a purely human construction. As a matter of fact, this opinion is strongly influenced by Bultmann-type theories that either deny the possibility of grasping the thought of the pre-paschal Jesus, or that it really is of any interest to try and do so.

Bultmann writes: “The gaze is fixed solely on what Jesus willed and hence on what can become actual as a requirement of his historical existence. This is another reason for eliminating interest in the ‘personality’ of Jesus. Not that I want to make a virtue of necessity, indeed, I am firmly of the opinion that we can know nothing more of the life and personality of Jesus, because christian sources were interested in it only in a very incomplete way, mixed with legend, and because there are no other sources about Jesus.” (1)

Concerning the Passion, Bultmann is explicit: “Undoubtedly Jesus died on the cross as a messianic prophet, no more nor less than other agitators.”(2) “The fragmentary and legendary accounts of the end of his activity throw light on this fact.”(3) “Completely foreign to Jesus is the acceptance of man’s claim that for him destiny should be intelligible and be worthy of an affirmative response. He did not leave man an intelligent explanation of suffering, just as he did not for his passion.”(4)

Two articles which appeared in the “Corriere della Sera” by Augusto Guerriero, 1972 and 1973, are worth noting. In the first, “From the historical Jesus to the Christ of faith,” he writes, “the great problem remains; that is, the impossibility of our knowing how Jesus interpreted his own death; we cannot know if he found meaning in it.” This contrasts with the thesis of the Catholic biblical scholar Zedda, whose essay he is commenting on, “The Historical Jesus at the

Beginnings of Christology in the New Testament”. In the second article, the same writer comments on another study of M. Bouttier: “Du Christ de l’Histoire au Jesus des evangiles” and that “the great problem consists in the impossibility of knowing how Jesus interpreted his own death. Did he find some meaning in this absurd destiny?” He states that while Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom, the apostles preached Christ. The writer holds that there is no continuity. The primitive church would have invented a Christ figure to serve the kerygma.

Catholic Position On The Historical Christ

The “historical Jesus” should be carefully distinguished from the “pre-paschal Jesus.” The problem of the first is typically historical but not soteriological. The historicity which Catholics hold by faith is, so to speak, “ecclesial”, as Vatican II explained clearly.

“Holy Mother church has firmly and with absolute constancy maintained and continues to maintain, that the four Gospels just named, whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when He was taken up (Acts 1:1-2). For, after the Ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed...but always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus. Whether they relied on their own memory and recollections or on the testimony of those who ‘from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word,’ their purpose in writing was that we might know the ‘truth’ concerning the things of which we have been informed.”(5) (Cfr. Luke 1:2-4)

Everyone agrees that the gospels were not written for historical purposes. It would be naive to suppose one could write a biography of Jesus; nor would we try to make a “Jesuology”, by reconstructing his human personality as a history. But it is of the utmost importance to be certain that when the apostles preached they effectively went back to what the Lord had made them in some way understand already before Easter (Cfr. John 2:22) where the texts speak of Jesus’ words about his ability to raise up the temple destroyed by the Jews in three days, and adds: “When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.” John is well aware of this necessity. In his Gospel Jesus, at the Last Supper, says that the task of the Spirit to come would be “to bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (Jn. 14:26), and that he “will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but...will take what is mine and declare it unto you” (Jn. 16:13ff). The Apostolic preaching has not created the wisdom of the cross ‘ex novo’, or even in a pneumatic way.

The application of critical methods to the study of the gospels has now led to establishing the continuity between the historical Christ and the Christ of faith, thus irreversibly going beyond Bultmann.(6) So we have the historical figure of Jesus as sketched out and distinguished from the “historical” Christ as preached in the primitive Church. We are able to go back more and more easily beyond the witness of the primitive church that gathered the words, attitudes and thought of Jesus (the *ipsissima verba, facta, intentio Jesu*). Numerous Catholic and Protestant exegetes have been engaged in this task. Their results have been a solid starting point, however articulated, for answers to questions on the pre-paschal Christ.(7)

Some theologians tend to be totally optimistic and give the results of their research as certain, identifying the exposition of the data given in the four Gospels of the Passion, unhesitatingly as the “thought of Jesus.” For instance, J. Galot, “Since the affirmations of...the primitive community cannot be explained simply as the authentication of the death of Jesus and its circumstances, they suggest that the theological and soteriological interpretation they imply has its origin in the words of Jesus himself. Jesus took many occasions to indicate how he understood his own death...”(8)

Other theologians are more cautious. Among these, Flick-Alszeghy. “The most radical problem doubtlessly is Jesus’ attitude toward’s his Passion and Death, that is, if he foresaw it, how he foresaw it and what meaning he gave it. We think that soteriological methods show as probable that Jesus foresaw his violent death, and that he gave it a salvific function... Soteriological verification of the evangelical narrative of the Passion is relatively interesting for theology.”(9)

As a matter of fact, the question is very important. As the above-quoted text says, “a comparison between the historical and evangelical description brings out the pedagogical intention of the hagiographers, that is, ‘the theology of the cross’ built up by the sacred authors themselves.”(10) This is precisely what we want to arrive at. Today’s inculturation of the theology of the cross will be fully liberated in no other way; being based on the New Testament understood above all as a method to be applied by analogy, while necessarily based on Jesus’ self-knowledge as its primordial and immutable faith datum.

From A Phantom Monophysitism To Contemporary Realism

In the beginning we spoke of an ingenuous fideism, as we now speak of a phantom Monophysitism. After having swept away the more or less rationalistic skepticism, there remains a last obstacle to research into the way the pre-paschal Jesus saw his cross. It is of faith that He had a supreme degree of infused knowledge and the beatific vision and that even as pilgrim on earth He saw everything with extreme lucidity, not merely as the hagiographers spoke in the New Testament, but in a far more sublime manner.

G. Moiola deals with this delicate question in masterly fashion, and we follow his thought.

“Christology has felt obliged to rethink itself as ‘the Christology of Jesus,’ comparing an ‘historical, evangelical’ picture of Jesus with a theological construction, derived from medieval scholasticism on the precise problem of Jesus’ ‘knowledge’ and ‘consciousness’”(11) Among other particular points emerges the question of Jesus’ knowledge of his death as salvific death(12) and the “coordinates of sacrificial and satisfactory types of interpretation of Jesus’ death – that is, solidarity and theocentrism – given us in the evangelical texts as present to the very awareness of Jesus.”(13)

In medieval theology the question, “what does Christ know?”– while referring to the pre-paschal Jesus – was given a deductive answer. By his hypostatic union and his authentic humanity, Jesus as man possesses knowledge on a beatific level, both infused and experimental. The first two levels present no difficulty, while paradoxically there is hesitation in justifying the use of the third level. “There is here a tendency towards a Monophysitism, for which a correction is sought, e.g., in Bonaventure and Thomas...”(14)

In later centuries there were adaptations for the most part. A change came with the modernist crisis that practically opened for discussion the beatific and infused knowledge. In 1918 the Holy Office intervened stating that this could not be taught “with certainty.”(15) This did not halt the speculation. Today, instead of beatific vision we prefer to speak of the human self-knowledge Jesus had of his divine sonship.(16) Rahner in particular explains the need to distinguish between athetic and thematic self-knowledge and that the passage to explicit knowledge comes with the very maturing of the individual himself through the experience of life. “The orientation seems acceptable in itself.”(17)

As for infused knowledge, in the given context it was interpreted as the functioning of prophetic illumination and in a certain measure of Jesus’ mission: illumination of salvific-religious type that is not the experience but is its frame and interpretation in a deeper and more radical synthesis. “It must be held that Christ was a man of his times; and that his type of geniality has a religious character.”(18)

“It is not a question of generic religiosity...but of an Hebraic one... In this milieu Jesus’ knowledge was truly ‘built up’ and he shows himself a religious genius...above all and always with a marvelous and disconcerting capacity for “re-reading” so as to ‘complete’ the ancient revelation in a qualitatively new manner.”(19)

However difficult it may seem, we have to eliminate the “sweet poison of Monophysitism.”(20) It sounded very pious and in conformity with ancient tradition (at least according to the interpretation of platonic Christians!) either to reduce the human nature of Christ to an apparent body (Docetism) or to let it be penetrated with the divinity and be absorbed to the point of being, in form, nothing but God’s livery...”(21)

“The reshaping described...gives us a picture of Christ’s intellectual life that is very much nearer his evangelical figure... The Christ ‘according to the flesh’ is not a ‘comprehensor’ that miraculously is not living in a state of transfiguration, but a man truly living a human experience, who interprets it with the unique depth and finality according to the divine “wisdom” – “seeing” himself to be the only Son of God.”(22)

The Terrible Human Experience Of Jesus

C. Porro is a careful student of the self-knowledge of Jesus, who keeps in touch with the most recent reliable authors. Already in 1972 he concluded that in Jesus there was progressive self-awareness as to his end, and in particular as to the meaning of his mission as Servant of Yahve. Hence, the search for a meaning to his imminent death emerges.(23) Another of his studies analyses particularly the predictions of the Passion attributed to Jesus, to show how they unite the natural foresight Jesus had of his death with the deep sense of his identity.(24) Porro is more cautious on this point in his 1977 study quoted above.(25) But the essential elements are reinforced.

“The parable of the wicked husbandman (Matt. 21:33-46) is an historical proof of Jesus’ awareness that he was advancing towards a violent death; as also the references to the chalice he is to drink and the baptism with which he is to be baptized (Lk. 10:39; Matt. 20:23) and his invitation to the disciples to follow him to the end, without fearing those who could kill the body (Lk. 12:4ff; 14:27).

“Decisive also is Jesus’ behavior as He goes up to Jerusalem towards his end: well aware of the fate of the prophets and John the Baptist, he did not draw back; on the contrary, he was convinced that his own death was the logical result of his deeds, his solidarity with sinners, the authority he claimed which he interpreted as the will of God on many occasions.

But did Jesus want this death? Recent critical studies incline toward an affirmative answer to this question. Indeed, it seems that the historical Jesus wanted this death, or at least it is certain he was ready for a death-destiny determined by his behavior. For, even when he saw clearly the opposition he could expect, not only did he do nothing to appease it, but actually provoked it.”(26)

Among the authors whom Porro synthesizes, some are worth noting for their serious research and certain aspects of their contribution.

J.L. Chordat has made a critical study of the gospel of Mark to find out the words the community attributed to Jesus and those that go back to Jesus Himself. And he concludes that “from a certain moment (but impossible to specify) Jesus understood that the special awareness he had of himself and his vocation would lead to his death. First under form of images, then with full clarity, he prepared his disciples... Mark’s account puts before us a clear-headed man walking towards a death he has foreseen, one who lives with inward distress, solitary, caught between his friends’ betrayal and the hostility of the others, a fully human being, suffering to the most intense degree but in the absolute grandeur of freedom...” (27)

A. George admits that like all historical research, this too will be often more probability than certainty. But of these studies some may be taken up. Jesus saw death coming, which his disciples were also aware of and – as all the prophets – he was less concerned with anticipating the details than with giving it a meaning. Jesus met death with extreme courage. But he did not fail to see it as an evil, “the crime of those whose initiative and responsibility it was (his is not a suicide) and so could damn themselves. Before his Passion Jesus denounced the murderers of the prophets (Mt. 23:29-37:Lk.11:47-51;34-35).

The principal reason for his agony in Gethsemane seems to have been the prospect of the loss of the people who rejected him. At the root of this evil, the words by which Jesus denounced Satan may express the thought of the Master.”(28) (*Lumiere et Vie* 1971, #101, p. 50)

M. Bastin compares about twenty important passages of the Gospel (and their synoptic variants) elaborating a rigorous method that destroys Bultmann’s radical skepticism. He studies in particular the Qumran Hebrew texts, the apocryphal writings and rabbinic literature to bring out, with surprising realism, the historical horizon in which Jesus’ “journey” to Jerusalem is situated. “It is not enough to extricate the figure of Jesus from an ecclesial clothing we also have to show that he is not mixed up with the Jewish currents of his time...But the criterion of unlikeness is incomplete. It overlooks all those cases in which Jesus’ thought was rooted in the Palestinian humus that was his own.”(29)

H. Schuermann, too, has studied and elaborated his results in the context of a “growing interest for the pre-paschal Jesus”(30), demonstrating that “even before Easter, Jesus understood and faced his death in a pre-existing attitude...offering eschatological salvation in an attitude of service...”(31) Schuermann’s irrefragable methodology does not perhaps lead to extraordinary

results quantitatively speaking, but permits us to follow the essential central idea, the “pro nobis” to be found then in the most primitive Pauline kerygma of the Passion [I Cor. 15:3].(32)

But the scholar who seems to have centered the problem best and resolved it most successfully is Jacques Guillet.(33) He has given so much weight to Jesus’ self-knowledge as to dedicate a whole article on “JESUS”, written for the “Dictionnaire de Spiritualite” [1973](34). He explains very specially how Jesus confided in his friends that he was going towards his death. “These confidences are incomparable; they give a consistency to the consciousness of Jesus going to his death that would otherwise remain inexplicable. On the one hand he is too clear-sighted to ignore the strength of opposition rising against him...on the other hand, he goes into this adventure of his life and death conscious of a mission he always defines in reference to the Old Testament... transcendent mission analogous to that of the prophets, awareness in a unique way of being their zenith and fulfillment.”(35) This article is of outstanding shrewdness and depth on the last period of Jesus’ life before the Passion and on the events of Good Friday.(36) The chapter on the predictions of the Passion is of special importance. “Jesus’ perception of his Passion and his prediction of its coming are both certain as to the event, dependent on natural foresight and intuitions...and mysterious with regard to its meaning. From the point of view of literary form and composition of the Gospels, the language Jesus uses to predict his Passion is certainly unique in tone and scope, implying a knowledge mysterious and beyond us; but this is the knowledge of a man, and to this we have access.”(37) “Jesus’ speech in the Gospels is not that of a visionary deciphering a future that is about to unfold before him, but it is the language of a man sent by God, aware of his mission and its results, reading in this light approaching events that, like all, He sees coming upon Him.”(38)

“There is something unique and totally human, but accessible to us, in the knowledge of Jesus. Because the certainty of being at the center of God’s action which is its uniqueness...supposes a two-fold but complementary course, yet both belonging to our world. Jesus sees his future and his Passion in a two-fold light...his clear view of the world makes him certain he will not escape the death being prepared for him. His certitude of being the end point of Scripture gives him the guarantee that this death is the zenith of God’s work, the fulfillment of his promises and man’s salvation...His awareness comes from a depth which is lost to our sight, but we perceive in it a real being; not a mythical structure but a mystery both revealed and given.”(39)

How Jesus Expresses The Salvific Value Of The Cross

And so we have reached the crucial point: from a critical point of view, how to establish the way Jesus expressed his awareness of the salvific value of his painful end. This is the wisdom of the cross properly so-called, but it must be treated very carefully, so that it is the authentic nucleus of every modern reformulation of the same wisdom and does not close us into a prison without exit. “The results of an historical research into the awareness of Jesus the Man faced with his death are very valuable...However at this point we must note a grave danger hidden in this very research. Though certainly legitimate, even indispensable, offering as it does new insight into Christ’s human consciousness, at the same time it is insufficient as a basis for a theological discourse.” (40)

Jesus interpreted his death in Old Testament categories and we should understand their meaning. But today we are not confined to them and the field is open to decide which categories

may be used to express the divine message of salvation adequately (in view of modern cultural references in our theologies). Saying this we also want to reaffirm that the work of Jesus the Messiah spans his whole earthly life and death, even if later on it was unfolded and its meaning understood by the disciples only after the resurrection and Pentecost.(41) This, indeed, gives salvific value to these events too, but only as correlatives of one unique event, the resurrection being only the perennial and redeemed 'definiteness' of the wisdom of the cross.(42) We shall return to this point.

Apart from an irreducible fringe of radical critics, all biblical scholars agree that the summit of Jesus' active awareness of his end is expressed at the Last Supper. We shall concentrate on this, though the exegesis of other passages throughout the gospels is very impressive. "The supper is not only the last prediction of the Passion, the last chance for Jesus to show what is about to happen to him and that he knows why; it is a creation in which Jesus Himself gives the meaning to the death he will undergo."(43)

Interpretative problems of the narrative are many; in fact, in the gospels it is henceforth built up around the model of the eucharistic celebrations. But "most certainly the paschal atmosphere envelops Jesus' last meal..."(44) This link was undoubtedly willed by Jesus himself. From his very clear and deliberate intention we should measure the breadth, for He "transforms the traditional aspect of this supper in depth, thus giving it fresh meaning."(45)

Jesus likes to keep and bring out the familiar traits of the paschal rite existing already in Jewish customs: celebration in intimacy, not in the temple.(46) Within this framework Jesus performs a prophetic gesture, His self-giving in the broken bread and shared chalice. An incredible gesture since it passes over the event of his death as if it had already taken place, and makes present the future kingdom. Sitting at the table were the traitor, the one who "hands over" Jesus, and Jesus the one who "is handed over." Jesus turns the situation of satanic sin upside down, making of the betrayal that hands him over (seeing the Father behind it all as from the Incarnation He 'handed him over' to the world) the insuperable gift of life for those he loves.(47)

It is very difficult, without doing violence to the texts, to remove from the words of Jesus the reference to the sacrifice and the covenant. Jesus does not stop at putting an end to the world of sin through his pardon. He opens up a new world by a gesture of institution. The constitutional covenant implies the certainty of starting a world whose law will be his gospel and whose style will be the certain expectation of the glorious fulfillment of the kingdom. Here the foundation is not the rite – which is actually reduced to a minimum – but the certainty that Jesus is going to the Father victoriously, pleasing and agreeable to Him, as the resurrection will later demonstrate.(48)

The Luminous Darkness Of Calvary

After the cenacle, the tremendous experience of Jesus will be consummated in His real Passion. Passing over complex exegetical problems about the account, we want only to show that the perfect and human self-awareness of Jesus is confirmed overwhelmingly and paradoxically at the very beginning in Gethsemane, and at the end, in the final disconsolate cry of his agony on the cross.

The scandalous scene of Gethsemane assures us that Jesus' humanity was never in any way "armed" against events. "His disheartenment and his violent human reaction before death are faithfully transmitted by Mark who usually does not linger over questions of psychology. This aspect will be progressively attenuated in the later evangelical tradition."(49) Yet it was in Gethsemane that Jesus confirmed his certainty of being the beloved of the Father as well as his freedom to give himself up to His mysterious designs,

"Mark is the only one to reproduce the original Aramaic form (abba), that must have struck the witnesses; it has been recognized as an 'ipsissima vox' preserved accurately. It is worth noting also that Mark rarely describes the prayer of Jesus (only twice besides the supper) and never its content. The threefold mention of the prayer must doubtless indicate that Jesus renewed and prolonged his prayer."(50) And the content is amazing: it is the statement that the "manner" of salvation through the cross is, after all, contingent on the choice of the Almighty. And it is supremely important for Jesus and for ourselves that so it should remain, so that freedom and not fatality be present. However intense the temptation to distance this "hour", in reality salvation arrives precisely when "the hour has come" (Mk. 14:35,41).

After the capture, trials and tortures have reduced Jesus now to a "worm", he agonizes at the cross in that mysterious darkness that has covered the earth (cfr. Mk.15:33). Here, too, it is of the utmost importance that the two most primitive synoptic gospels have preserved the one scandalous word, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk.15:34). "It is the last word the evangelists could possibly have invented, and to have preserved it in Aramaic is one of unique historical value."(51) It expresses the meaning of total failure that Jesus humanly speaking senses in a tragic unrelieved way. But it is also and always the dialogue with the Father that constitutes the thread of His existence. God remains "his" God! And it is not for nothing that after this atrocious death Mark places the centurion's profession of faith (cfr. Mk. 15:39).

In reality at this point, mystery and revelation are one thing; the wisdom of the cross will have to risk everything on penetrating the divine link between the life of Christ – and the disciple called to follow in his footsteps – and the certain and anticipated coming of the kingdom precisely when the cross seals this existence.

IV. FROM THE BIBLE TO THEOLOGY

Like a fruitful seed, the unchangeable core of the consciousness of Jesus is contained in the New Testament, and flourishes there in innumerable kerygmatic and theological interpretations, which decisively start the whole history of Christian thought in motion. It is a question of normative statements, abounding with Biblical inspiration, as well as statements gathered outside their cultural expression. Hence, we shall touch briefly on these formulations as found in the New Testament. We shall then show how a certain line of their evolution may today seem to be something forced, or better, a cultural lacuna, which is precisely the premise for a theological or pastoral search for re-elaboration.

"Descending" Dynamics In The Apostle St. Paul

Even before the Gospels had taken their final shape, Paul had already written his principal letters and expressed "his" gospel (cfr. Rom. 2:16) authoritatively and solemnly therein. It could be said that "New Testament reflection on the meaning of the cross had reached its climax in the

‘Corpus Paulinum’, whether because of the frequency with which the apostle returns to this theme, or the central importance he gives it or the degree of elaboration he gives to the salvific function of the cross.”(1)

Since Paul is, in fact, accused of having changed the meaning of the cross (or, rather, of having invented it to overcome the scandal), we should do well to keep clearly in mind that as a matter of fact he started off from a pre-existing tradition, which he is careful to mention. “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures...” (I Cor. 15:3).

This primitive statement reminds us of the Pauline formula of the institution of the Eucharist. “This is my body which is for you...”(I Cor. 15:3) And Mark’s formula, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many...” (Mark. 14:24) Scholars agree that here at least in the very first Christian community, not to speak with almost absolute certainty of the pre-paschal Jesus himself, we have a reference to Isaiah’s prophecy of the servant of Yahve. “So shall he, my servant, vindicate many, himself bearing the penalty of their guilt...he bore the sin of many...” (Is. 53:11ff) Thus it seems clear that with Paul we reach the summit of the revelation of Jesus and the renewal of understanding of the Old Testament through the key passage of Isaiah.

The reference to the servant is so archaic that it very quickly disappears from the New Testament. The clearest references to this christological “title” are to be found in Acts 3 and 4, in the context of the Petrine kerygma. From the literary point of view, this does not influence Paul very much; but he makes it the basis of his “descending” interpretation of the salvific value of the cross. Indeed, his most important elements are drawn from there: the Servant is God’s chosen one, his messenger; the “arm of the Lord” works in him in a way no one could have imagined, that is, through humiliations and sufferings. The value of his work comes from the freedom, obedience and humility with which he suffers.

An equally well-known passage in Philippians 2:7 can be compared with I Corinthians 15:3: “...He emptied himself taking the form of a servant...” According to commonly accepted conclusions, here too, Paul takes up a pre-existing liturgical hymn, in which the explanation of the cross is the contrast, humiliation-exaltation. For us are reference to the “servant” and his “obedience” are the main facts.

For the third important passage is the typically Pauline Romans 5:12-21. Verse 19 shows clearly that the apostle was thinking of the “servant” of the Book of Isaiah. “By one man’s obedience many will be made righteous” – which is an allusion to Isaiah 55:11 (‘my servant shall vindicate many’). In the Isaian text, the words “many” is a Hebraism for the multitude, the totality. And it is precisely this universal extension of salvation that is characteristic of the ancient prophecy, scarcely accepted before Christ, but becomes the keystone of Pauline thought.

In his letters we find Paul using a variety of categories to express the salvific efficacy of Jesus’ death. Although it would be an error to systematize too easily the various data of Pauline theology of the cross, there are certain well-documented elements that, according to exegetes, are recognized as coming from Paul’s thought. The most important is the absolute character of the divine initiative. “In the whole event of the cross, the author of salvation is the Father. His attitude toward humanity is not changed by the cross, rather, the cross is the instrument of his salvific will.”(2)

“God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself...that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:18a). “The Father willed...through Christ, to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (Col. 1:19ff).

It is obvious, then, that the primacy of grace is the key to the reading of St. Paul. Salvation is a pure gift of God. Scholars go further and speak of a twofold expression of this truth, one “negative” and the other “positive”.

The negative view (stressed especially by Protestant theology) is in the “no” – in the cross – God says to man, in that of himself he cannot in any way procure his own salvation. The uselessness of all the efforts of Jesus made before the Paschal event, that these theologians agree reached its heights precisely at “his hour”, symbolize and make plain (historically as well) that man can do absolutely nothing.

Paul’s most radical statements should be read in this key. “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do; sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (Romans 8:3). “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13).

The positive view (held usually by Catholics, but not exclusively) is the “yes” of the Father to mankind, delighting in the “yes” uttered – through Christ obedient till death – to him, maintained in its turn faithful until and beyond the death of the man, to honour his own promise (the Covenant) sworn before the creation.

Here again, Paul’s texts are explicit. “For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.” (2 Cor. 1:19ff). “For the gifts of and the call of God are irrevocable...For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all” (Rom. 11:29, 32). “If God is for us who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (Rom. 8:31-32). “Have this mind among yourselves, which is in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God...became obedient unto death, even death on the cross...Therefore has God highly exalted him...” (Phil. 2:5-11).

Examined more closely, the two views are not incompatible; in fact, in ultimate analysis they meet. The obedience that draws down God the Father’s approval is actually that by which God the Son accepts his “sacramental” intra-historical failure, leaving us his mind as inheritance. But the man who is willing to live his life based on “this” obedience as foundation becomes in reality omnipotent, since God [called Father precisely in reference to “the father of our faith”, Abraham, ready to sacrifice his son] (cfr. Rom. 4:16; Gen:22:13), can refuse him nothing.

John The Evangelist’s “Descending” Dynamics

The maturing of Christian thought during the first century is attested to in Johannine theology; basically it is fully in accord with the principle characteristics of Pauline thought that we have called “descending”, even if in a way, it follows an independent line.

Paradoxically, the Johannine Jesus is the one who seeks not his own, but the glory of the Father, and is already here below glorified in truth, already manifesting the divine glory... “The word became flesh and dwelt among us...and we have beheld his glory...; the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn 1:14, 18).

The initiative of the cross is wholly the Father’s – wholly inspired by love. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” (Jn. 3:16). Jesus spoke in this vein from the beginning alluding to the “serpent that was raised” (cfr. Numbers 21:8-9), that is, to His cross. He was convinced that his humble and retiring messianism was the very way foreseen for salvation by the Father. Hence, he quoted what had been written of him by Moses to his opponents (cfr. Jn. 5:46), reproaching them for “receiving glory from one another instead of seeking the glory that comes only from God” (cfr. Jn. 5:44).

Repeatedly and strongly, Jesus speaks of his absolute intimacy with the Father whom “he knows” in a unique way (cfr. Jn. 7:29; 8:5). But for this very reason he goes on repeating, “I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he will be the judge...If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me...”(Jn. 8:50, 54).

“He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true...” (Jn. 7:18). Death will make this clear: “...When you have lifted up the Son of Man then you will know that I am He and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me” (Jn. 8:28). The drama of Jesus lies in this, that he gives his last teaching through the tragic silence of death. “Father, glorify thy name...And I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all men to myself” (cfr. Jn. 12:28,32).

Death is therefore the supreme paradox. Jesus, the Master, is abandoned by everybody; he is alone with the Father who remains with him because he is obedient (cfr. Jn. 8:16,19). To seek the glory of God the Father, for Jesus, Man and Son, means to acknowledge that, though he is the only mediator, yet “No one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him” (cfr. Jn. 6:44,65). And the Father intervenes at moments that even the Son does not know (cfr. Mk. 13:32).

Paradoxically again, while not claiming to fix God’s times, this conduct anticipates the eschatological event in the present. It is common knowledge that for John the twofold meaning of “exaltation” includes an identification, for Jesus, of the cross and glory, and for mankind the resurrection (glory of the crucified one) and God’s kingdom. The “hour” (or time) of Jesus is his whole life lived under the sign of the cross (renunciation of his own glory) and hence, in a much more concentrated manner, the moment of his death. And this hour is the divine judgment on the world, the presence of the resurrection in the world (Jn. 5:25-29; 11:25).

This is a difficult and delicate point that should not be misunderstood. John has a vertical and a horizontal view of the history of salvation which meet but do not destroy each other. What we have just said above concerns the vertical view. Salvation, in this case, leaves aside the flow of time and is out into the present of every person who enters into contact and harmony with God,

the Saviour. Here we would say, everyone who has faith in Jesus and hence adopts his lifestyle. “Whoever lives and believes in me will never die”(Jn.11:26).

Should this view be absolutized (as, e.g., Bultmann) the whole would become useless. For being something outside the Bible and part of the Gnostic teaching it is no longer revelation. But John knows the horizontal view of salvation history very well, according to which, however much God acts from above, he acts within history and through history. In his farewell discourse, Jesus clearly foresees that after his death the disciples will suffer persecution (cfr. Jn. 16:2,4,20) and a period of evangelization (cfr. Jn. 17:14-23). Still clearer is the Book of Revelation which supposes this future flow of history and its glorious epilogue. We are on the Biblical track.

It is not difficult to harmonize the two points. Salvation in the vertical sense not only does not take away the meaning of history’s flow but is precisely what transforms “chronological” history (bound up with cosmic time) into history of salvation, that is, the expansion of the “kairos”, significant and opportune time.

Here once more, the cross is the key. To accept that the cross is glory is to decide definitively for the person, who in this decision is judged and transferred to eternal life. As this “light” spreads little by little, the whole world becomes part of it and history takes on its definitive meaning.

From A “Descending” To An “Ascending” Dynamic

The thought of Paul and John are typically bound up into a descending dynamic. John especially makes Jesus’ role above all a revealer’s role. However, there is already present a touch of ascending dynamic, that in practice, we think, will become preponderant in Christian thought about the cross.

The reason for this is found in the undeniable allusion the pre-paschal Jesus makes to the sacrifice, explaining his death at the Last Supper and offering it as food to his friends. Little by little, as cultural categories take up more space, so the ascending dynamic will take first place. Here, however there is need of very great attention and intelligent discernment.

It seems very interesting to stop at the term “expiation” that has determined much Catholic theology. For Paul and John this remains in the descending line. “Christ Jesus whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood” (Rom. 3:25). “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins”(Jn. 4:10).

The term used by Paul (hilasterion) corresponds with the Hebrew “Kapporet”, propitiatory. It is the cover of the Ark, the throne of God, the place of his presence. Faith consists in accepting that God’s definitive presence is the Crucified One! Bathed in his own blood, humiliated unto death, Christ shows forth God’s glory! “The term ‘hilasterion’, applied to Christ, does not refer to the expiatory goat (Lev. 16:22). Symbolically loaded with the sins of the people, it represented the repudiation of sinners on the part of the community and hence it was considered impure and cast out into the desert. But victims offered to God were always considered very pure.

In Pauline symbolism the blood of Christ corresponds to the blood of the immolated victims with which the ‘propitiatory’ of the Ark was anointed.(3)

This is still clearer when we remember that the framework necessary to lead us back to the whole wisdom of the cross is that of the Last Supper. The supper also places in the right light the category of “redemption” (or ransom), that the pre-paschal Jesus could use (cfr. Mk. 10:45), but most certainly in the context of the Servant of Yahve, the one whom God loves because He gives his life freely. In fact, the term “redemption” in the paschal context refers to the term God himself uses to express his will to free the Hebrews from the Egyptians with a strong arm (cfr. Ex. 6:6ff), considering himself to act as ‘go’el’ the close relative who had to ransom his brother from slavery (Lev. 25:26f; cfr. Is. 43:14 etc.). The ensemble of Biblical texts shows that the first redemption, in Exodus, was a victorious liberation and Yahve did not pay a ransom to Israel’s oppressors. The second (Deuteronomy and the Servant figure) is still more gratuitous and undeserved, since the exile was a punishment for the people’s infidelity.

Therefore, the blood of the Paschal Lamb did not pacify God, but was the glory of the Hebrews who prided themselves on it as a sign of salvation prepared by God. And the blood marking the conclusion of the covenant on Sinai (cfr. Exodus 24) is typical of the communion of a pact sealed for life. This is certainly in Paul’s mind when he speaks of the Eucharist: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons..”(I Cor. 10:16, 20ff).

To conclude, the cultural category is definitely overcome precisely by the transfer of the rite to the essential fact. In the Canticle of Isaiah 53:10, it is said of the Servant: “He who made of himself a sacrifice for sin (‘asham’) will enjoy a long life and see his children’s children, and in his hand the Lord’s cause shall prosper.” Of course, this sacrifice was not foreseen among the ritual ones. In any case Jesus avoids these terms so as not to restrict the meaning of the act by which he freely gives his life according to the wisdom of the cross. Overcoming the cultural categories was probably meant by Jesus when He applied to himself (which seems to have been in the pre-paschal period) the Messianic Psalm 110, where the Messiah is called “priest forever according to the order of Melchisedech.”

Perhaps however it is precisely here that a certain different orientation in interpreting the cross begins, which is testified to by the Letter to the Hebrews. This text – perfectly in harmony with the Pauline and Johannine doctrine – is wholly dedicated to exalting the sublimity of Christ’s role, which puts a definite end to the old law, transcending it in extraordinary fashion, precisely because he is a “priest according to the order of Melchisedech” (cfr. Heb. 5:6; 6:20;7:21). But the arguments of the Letter could lead to replacing the event of Jesus in the very cultural categories from which he tried to escape. What justifies the stress on the ascending dynamic of the wisdom of the cross is the moving emphasis given to the “human cost” Jesus had to pay, and which we cannot be silent about if we want to be truly conformed to Him.

The Complex Themes Of The Letter To The Hebrews

What has had a major influence on the further development of Christian thought is the insistence in Hebrews on Jesus as High Priest. This terminology, as we know, is generally absent in the New Testament precisely to avoid confusion. But paradoxically just because of the desire to transcend definitely the levitical priesthood, prominence might be given to this ritual aspect, in the christian liturgy, or the ascending dynamic of sacrifices in the theology of the cross.

The text of Hebrews leaves us no doubt. Its thesis is that we have turned a page completely with regard to the Old Testament. "For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. For the one (Jesus) of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah..." (Heb. 7:12).

Besides, Hebrews aims at proclaiming the unique and absolute sufficiency of the Jesus event that makes it impossible to suppose there should be others from the point of view of salvation. "Under the old covenant there were many priests because they were prevented by death from remaining in office; but Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood which does not pass away...For the law sets up as high priests men who are weak, but the word of the oath which came after the law appoints as priest the Son, made perfect forever" (Heb. 7:23-24, 28).

More explicitly, finally, Hebrews compares the new sacrifice of Christ's obedience to the Father to all those of the Old Law, in the perspective of Psalm 40, cited as prophecy (cfr. Heb. 10:5-10). Only in this sense can we speak of Christ as "entering the sanctuary with his own blood, and achieved eternal redemption" (cfr. Heb. 9:11-27).

Thus we reach the most positive aspect of the ascending dynamic, that is, the great importance of the human aspect of Jesus' sacrifice in Hebrews. "The author of the Letter to the Hebrews has had the courage to speak, as perhaps no other theologian of the primitive Church, in terms quite scandalously human of Jesus as man, while he is the one perhaps more than any other, who has accentuated more clearly the divinity of the Son."(4)

From the viewpoint of Hebrews, Jesus as priest leads humanity to its perfection by becoming perfect himself in the suffering of obedience. Hebrews sees it as quite right that God "should make their leader in the work of salvation perfect through suffering...Since he was himself tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:10,18). "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..."(Heb. 5:8ff).

However much Hebrews insists on stating Jesus to be free from sin (cfr. 4:15; 7:26; 9:14), the crucial point of his "priesthood" is placed, in those moments of his temptation, recalling the key scene of the Gospels: when in the desert Jesus obeys the Father, choosing a "poor" messianism, instead of the triumphalist attitude suggested by the devil; complementary to a scene which has its explicit fulfillment when in Gethsemane he overcomes the final temptation, accepting the cross in perfect abnegation of his own human instinct of preservation. This is the Christ Hebrews wants us to gaze on to seek encouragement (cfr. Heb. 12:1-3). "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned" (Heb. 4:15).

Thus Jesus of Hebrews saves us by giving us "confidence" "since the blood of Jesus assures our entrance into the sanctuary by the new and living path he has opened for us through the veil [the 'veil' meaning his flesh]" (Heb. 10:19ff). In fact this way had already been followed by the just of the Old Testament who had made the same choice of a poor and obedient faith (cfr. Heb. 11), as Jesus, who inspires and perfects our faith. For the sake of the joy which lay before him he endures the cross, heedless of its shame. He has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God. (Heb.12:2)

We return fully to the time of the obedient Servant, our original point of departure. Of absolute priority is Jesus' inner attitude. Stress on the priesthood places it in fuller light because Jesus "offers", that is "gives" himself; he is not simply the "lamb" or victim directly sacrificed by God the Father, as the reference to Abraham might seem to infer.

To conclude, from Hebrews we see that our ideas on the wisdom of the cross are complete precisely because they flow from the very human attitudes of Jesus, and we can consider how we should place them within modern cultural coordinates.

Unfortunate Inflexibility Of One Kind Of Theology

We cannot and do not wish here to give a complete review of Catholic soteriology. But we have to make a brief reference so as to see why and how much a certain inflexibility has to be overcome since it is especially dangerous for the pastoral idea of the wisdom of the cross.

Mainline catholic theology has always remained attached to the basic data of revelation. But in the West, from the time of St. Anselm, a considerable misunderstanding has remained; the cross has been looked on above all in an ascending dynamic and in a context of justice rather than love. According to this theory, the just God demands reparation to his honour offended by man's sin. And since only a God can make adequate reparation, He willed that His Son supply it by His death. No need here to discuss the historical context in which St. Anselm tried to "rationalize" the doctrine of the redemption. Today, commentators justify him, eliminating from his theory any idea of a kind of "inhuman self-love" in the God of the Bible. However this does not change the fact that the greater part of Scholasticism followed this road which today is accepted with difficulty.

Not thus Thomas Aquinas in his "Summa Theologica". He first of all clears away the exaggerations about divine justice. "If God proposed to free man from sin without any satisfaction he would not have acted against justice..."(5) Therefore, if the Father "hands over" Christ to the Passion it is out of respect for man's dignity, that is, because just as a man was overcome by Satan, so it should be a man who overcomes him. "The Father's action has a clear descending direction; from the beginning, full of love, He sends His Son for the salvation of mankind."(6) Hence, the very Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ have primarily a descending efficacy also "in so far as the mysteries of Christ have instrumental efficient causality for the salvation of mankind."(7)

This instrumental efficacy is certainly difficult to interpret, but on the whole it is very clear and excludes anything coming from man that would "change" God, by pacifying Him or influencing Him in any other way. "God wills intensely the salvation of all men and He hates sin intensely...not as a desire to receive something from man, but to lavish the communication of His divine fullness...God then, as He "hands over" His own son to death, satisfies His own Person, in that, changing the heart of sinful man through the life, passion, death and resurrection of the Word Incarnate, He overwhelms him with gifts...God's triumph not only is victorious over enemies, but changes human dispositions...above all for an ontological change of creatures, to whom God's love restores grace."(8)

Unfortunately Scholastic theology later on was often lost in subtleties, above all about appraising the "necessity" of the Passion, the "perfection" of the satisfaction given to God, etc.

The discussion, carried on with sharp and subtle intelligence, respected the data of revelation, but the key concepts of the rationalizing did not come from revelation but from the ideas of juridical thought, dear to the mentality of the time. This eliminated a priori a considerable part of the traditional doctrine on the redemption, that could not be expressed in those categories (liberating victory of God and above all the instrumental causality of Christ's humanity) and deviated from the understanding of the faith, because it deduced from revelation affirmations outside the direction of the communicative intention of revelation itself, which was wholly ordered to our salvation.”(9)

“This orientation was taken up by neo-scholastic renaissance...making the ideas and opinions rigid. Textbooks from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, particularly because of the dispute against liberal Protestantism and modernism, fighting against a purely metaphorical interpretation of concepts used in research on the understanding of the cross, overlooked the analogy of these concepts. Thus it made the arguments on ransom, sacrifice and satisfaction of Christ, etc., strangely unreal.”(10)

The idea of sacrifice was established with a priori methods starting from the Old Testament and even from “natural religions” and then this was applied to the cross, emphasizing the sacrificial interpretation of it.

There were no lack of efforts (especially in Germany) to express the christian message in a language different from the Biblical or scholastic one. Today these efforts also correspond to a strongly felt need for an expression of the wisdom of the cross in cultural categories suitable to modern man.

V. CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL VIEWS OF THE WISDOM OF THE CROSS

It is quite impossible to even attempt a survey of contemporary efforts to express the wisdom of the cross in a faithful and intelligent way. By way of example and direction only, we shall speak of a few. They all have in common a kind of sensitivity for the sacred categories of the past, either because of the blind alleys into which they were drawn or of an invading secularization (at least in the West). But to find fresh categories it was necessary first of all to express the meaning of the “salvation” brought us by Christ.

We had called it “the certain anticipated coming of the kingdom.” It is precisely this reality of salvation – so named in Jesus and the New Testament – that stimulates modern thought, sensitive to future other-worldly categories. These sacred categories, considering their marginalization, were accepted only if and in as far as the existential anticipations are credible.

Is Modern Man Looking For Salvation? If So, What Kind?

In the 19th century the Western Christian's faith crisis was also due to the proud presumption that he had no longer to expect salvation of any kind from heaven. Scientific positivism held up before his eyes the bright prospect of attaining on earth the satisfaction of all his desires, and immanentist philosophies demolished all images of a beyond as dreams. In this century now coming to its end all earthly hopes seem to have collapsed. Authentic Christian hopes, on the other hand, are struggling to return.

In 1975 Nicola Abbagnano, speaking to Italian theologians, admitted that man, in his tireless search to escape from the innate instability of his existence, has failed along all the roads he has taken in history. There is no guarantee, but history and experience oblige us not to take this absence of security in the immanent order, as a condemnation to perdition. Man goes on fighting all the same to create that salvific order that he no longer recognizes as functioning in nature and history.

It would seem that the important factors in this new consciousness are at least two: the twilight of the gods and the emerging of the Third World. Marxist utopia and technological hope have both vanished, considering their obvious incapacity to save man from his ultimate and deepest alienation. Neither free rein for affluence nor social justice imposed by force have been productive. The “quality” of life is in frightening decline. More decisive still, perhaps, is the powerful emergence of the Third World to upset world politics and economy. It has created a strong guilt complex and an ambiguous fear of regression in the West, while in the Third World the irresistible longing for its own integral liberation grows. We look towards its “wisdom” as to horizons that show us anew the reality of the “invisible” and its salvific power.

Thus all anthropology becomes soteriology too, that is, a search for the true essence of man, starting from that “not-yet-man” that we discover we are. An example is Moltmann in his essay “Man”(1) who sees man as freedom and openness like an “enigma”, the resolution of which in a rigid way would be equivalent to the definite liquidation of man himself, who can only continually become. “Man does not know his formula,” said Dostoevski. To the question “who is man?” God answers not by telling him who he is, but by unfolding to him a history at the depth of which the promise of communion with Himself is waiting.

Hence, salvation should be treated “in” history, not salvation “from” history. No one accepts any longer that salvation concerns only part of man: only moral, individual, metaphorical salvation. True salvation takes over the whole man, in his historicity and his various relationships with the contemporary world. Any other concept is considered reductive; if proposed by religion it is seen as source of an alienated, falsified behavior from its very assumptions.

Undoubtedly, man today sums up his idea of salvation in liberation from any and every form of alienation. Stressing more and more his need and capacity for radical criticism and demystification he discovers in ever wider measure how intrusive and fatal are the alienations he has lived in up to now and those in which he is imprisoned, perhaps in the name of progress. Cries of alarm are heard about the manipulation man is subjected to by the thousand more or less hidden persuaders of the crowd. Some currents of thought have even concluded that “man, as subject, does not exist”, being a mere product of impersonal structures, that is, fruit and result of socio-economic conditions unable to find any authentic interior originality.

Looking at this more closely, it seems that basic alienation for man is the lack of an immanent “model” of a successful human life. The inferior animal has it and has no existential problems; neither does it have any power of transcendence. Man is, therefore, infinitely superior, but perhaps this is just what makes him unhappy. In the course of centuries he has built up innumerable “models” of civilization, never fully hitting the mark. Even those apparently marvelously balanced in their various parts revealed fragilities and aging. Today we see them

pass without regret. Humanly speaking there is no other resource than to go on inventing new ones, perpetuating the labors of Sisyphus.

A radically secure model of salvation free from all alienation should save the whole man and all men, here and now, definitively. It should rise from man's heart so that, actualized, man can say with total sincerity that he is realizing himself. For a rationalist this is utopia. So the "politicians," intent on the art of the possible, fight it, accusing the utopians of obtaining an opposite effect, that is hindering even the smaller concrete realizations that would at least help free man from a few conditions. The utopians reply that those who search for such realizations as sufficient deceive mankind. Given the acceleration of history, they see in the course of only one generation how fragile are certain types of civilization.

Christ Crucified, Real Salvation Of Man

Noteworthy is the fact that believers – seeking the integral salvation of man according to the above-mentioned demands – more and more insist that Jesus Crucified is the true, actual and definitive salvation. At the end of 1972 at Bangkok, the conference of the World Council of Churches was precisely on this theme: "Salvation Today". It was characterized by a profound immersion into the Third World problematic and by a painful awareness of the tragic sense of life. It led to their as yet rather hesitating statement, that the true "sign of God", as actual presence of his power, is the cross! God transforms man's defeats into victory.

Whoever believes in the God proclaimed by Jesus should have full trust in the power and will of this God to create a world in which the norm of love excludes violence and hatred...Love does not destroy man who resists it; a person who loves prefers to accept his own destruction rather than destroy the other...Christ's cross is the guarantee of the kingdom of God..."(2) "The Holy Spirit is the God whose power has become in Christ Crucified the creative power of love and self-surrender; because of his presence mankind can participate in the history of the kingdom which is a movement of hope and wholeness, till salvation will belong to our God."(3)

Moltmann's line of thought is similar. "In the New Testament the question "who is man?" sends us to the man Jesus of Nazareth, whose life and death are narrated in the gospels. Of the one who dies on the cross abandoned by God and man, they say, 'Behold the man!' At the same time the New Testament tells us of God's reply, proclaimed by the Crucified, 'I shall be with you.' By faith, knowledge of God and of one's self merge in knowledge of Christ. The crucifix is the mirror in which we come to know God and ourselves."(4)

These orientations encourage us to go forward in our task of showing how modern man may benefit by the wisdom of the cross. But there are two dangers; to avoid them catholic theology has always been very careful not to go too far. The influence of the death of Christ, obedient to the cross, should not be a mere example, a witness that exercises a psychological attraction to imitation; here we should fall into a "pelagian" or "liberal- protestant" impoverishment of soteriology.(5) Neither should one give the impression of demonstrating rationally the validity of an 'anthropology of the cross'. The Pauline view of the cross as a scandal and a foolishness does not in the least encourage us to see in the human phenomenon the expectation of so paradoxical an event.(6)

Nevertheless "the intuitive discovery of the 'cross-centered' structure of salvation constitutes the synthesis that animates the theology of the cross. In the various 'events' and 'words' that

constitute the revealed message, the theologian finds a certain converging intelligibility of the cross, and in that cross finds a fresh intelligibility of the same events and words.”(7)

Jesus, The Perfect ‘Son Of Man’

First we shall present a few theological systems that are concerned with centering the wisdom of the cross on man, according to the anthropological shift we mentioned.

The most important leader in this shift is Karl Rahner. Typical of his thought is the statement that “man is the event of a free, absolute, undeserved and pardoning self-communication of God.”(8)

If we see man as essentially open towards the heights, towards God, then the Incarnation is like the total actualization of man’s capacities. Not that we can deduce it from this unlimited openness, the more so because existentially our sinfulness shows it is not given to everyone. But it can be stated that God has assumed a human nature which is existentially open and able to be assumed.

Every divine self-communication not only does not take transcendence from God but “on the contrary, it is precisely in this event of absolute self-communication on God’s part, that the divinity of God as sacred mystery becomes radical and immobile reality for man. Such an immediacy of God in his self-communication is precisely the manifestation of God ‘as’ absolute and permanent mystery.”(9)

For Rahner – who shows the importance of the pre-paschal historicity of Jesus and his self-knowledge – Jesus sees the imminence of the kingdom of God indissolubly linked to his person (10) in his unique and “filial” relationship to the ‘Father’ – we can see in a new and irrevocable way God’s nearness to all men.(11) Jesus knows that he is the “absolute” Saviour. This being so, the wisdom of the cross in him has different levels.

The pre-paschal Jesus freely accepts his destiny to die, at least as that of a prophet, as confirmation of his claim hoping it will be confirmed by God who intends to be glorified in him.(12) Theologically speaking, “such is the death of Jesus that in its inmost essence it is transcended in the resurrection; he dies in this...that means...the perennial, saved, finality of the one, unique life of Jesus who acquired this perennial finality of his life precisely through his death freely accepted in obedience.”(13)

“Through death comes the completed definitiveness of the existence of the man freely matured.” (14) The man Jesus, thus perfected by his death, is our guarantee and the permanence in history of God’s salvific promise.

“We are saved because this man who is one of us, is saved by God and because this God has made His salvific will present historically and really and irrevocably in the world.”(15)

A theology of death can unite more closely the event of Jesus’ death with the basic structure of human existence. Death is the unique action that dominates the whole life, in which man, as free being, disposes totally of himself...”(16) In the last analysis, the wisdom of the cross is this: that is, the absolute hope that good will not be annulled, in spite of apparent failures. Whoever has made a good moral decision for life or death in a radical, strong way so that he gains nothing

from it but the accepted goodness of this very decision, this man has already experienced eternity.”(17)

This is most certainly the best attempt in the catholic field to use categories of transcendent metaphysics and existential philosophy for the understanding and deepening of the Christ-event. We shall not here touch on difficulties raised by some theologians, that is, “that these categories seem to seriously compromise the gratuitousness of the Incarnation...and make salvation history the simple product of a metaphysical mechanism.”(18) We think these statements are very formal and hence do not help to discern the contents of the radical existential decision on which to base absolute hope and the anticipated experience of eternity.

Wishing to follow a more concrete line and the present-day theologians, we should, it seems, consider two moments, one more circumscribed and the other far more comprehensive. First of all, it is wisdom of the cross merely to exist more fully for the liberation of our brethren, considering the very poor means of simple interpersonal love as a very powerful one. But definitely, it is wisdom of the cross to exist with the conviction that, even when the evidence points in another direction, life itself can always have the meaning of “liberation”, if we do not refuse it ourselves. From this “anthropology of the cross” can be drawn a “theology” of the cross in the strict sense, that is, this type of man is not so by an arbitrary will of God, but precisely because in this way and this way alone, he is an image of the true God.

Jesus, The Perfect “Liberator”

After going back to the historical Jesus, there is a strict logical sequence in the growing preoccupation with historical circumstances that are of primary importance in determining the death of Jesus. Instead of a kind of abstract study, of immense intrinsic importance, of the death of “the Son of God”, of “expiatory sacrifice”, etc., research has gradually joined it up with the whole public life of Jesus which not only precedes but also motivates it historically. Thus from the historical, theological and contemporary point of view, it has been possible to validate the context of “liberation.”

Strictly speaking, this term is widely synonymous with ‘redemption.’ “In biblical language, before Christ, the Greek term ‘redemption’ had often lost all reference to the idea of a ransom and simply meant liberation.”(19) Today, when only too often to liberate hostages we have really to ransom them, the dramatic element of this happening is felt fully. But we all know that “liberation” has become a password of a theology developed in Latin America where socio-political connotations are more and more to the fore.

As we have said, we in no way reject these orientations. But we hold that the power to purify them from any kind of unwarranted confusion with purely political ideology is in fact the cross. It is insufficient to verify that Jesus did indeed aim at man’s total liberation. It must be added that the way He did it was wise and the results he obtained were effective. Otherwise Jesus becomes some sort of feeble pretext for going on with every type of revolution, from the guerrillas to that of technology.

The historical position is fully re-vindicated, for instance, by C. Duquoc, who skillfully keeps clear of any deviation. “Jesus is a prophet who uses an astonishing freedom of language. The religious authorities are worried about His behavior and his intentions; they smell heresy.

But the people foresee hope for political liberation. The Roman occupation gets rid of a dreamer who, in spite of himself, might become a source of disorder. Jesus' refusal to lead a political adventure gains him the support of the people. Having no means of defending himself, not willing to rely on means other than his preaching, Jesus is calumniated, condemned and crucified. Jesus' historical fate is analogous to that of many just men who have tried to change society with means other than by force. His death, like theirs, unmasks the power of evil while it reveals a hope and inspires the same free effort in other men. Jesus' death is fully human and not without meaning; like many others, He preferred 'justice and right' to his own life. His death differs little, then, from that of the 'just man'. So men who are trying to transform social relationships between men and give their life for it, find His death an inspiration. The fact that Jesus' death was human is the basis on which all other levels rest...The temptation to separate his death from actual history is no imaginary danger...It then becomes a divine-cosmic event...But Jesus' death is human, in the fullest sense of the word, because it is not only a 'biological' end but the consequence of an encounter." (20)

There is no doubt that Jesus intended really to liberate mankind. This was His Messianic proclamation at Nazareth when he made use of the text from Isaiah (cfr. Lk. 4:18; Is. 61:1). In the same way he turns to Isaiah to assure the Baptist of messianic role (Mt, 11:4; Is. 35:5). Here, precisely, we have the cross. "Jesus did not come to reveal the power of God. He refused to stir up an expectation that demanded a Saviour who would save man from constructing his own history and being lord of his own destiny. He refused to create a powerful kingdom. Man's historical condition was not to be upset by 'Jesus' 'messianism'. Not having thought about this revolution, he suffered condemnation to death. Between the promise and the expectation had slipped in a misunderstanding that Jesus destroyed. He did not act in the way people expected a Redeemer-Messiah to do. "Messianism" was transformed by His death...He failed to give us the Kingdom through a magical intervention..."(21)

We are already faced with a theological interpretation that may very easily find its place within Jesus' historical experience. This experience was united to a long fellowship with contemporary ways and ideas, the revolutionary intuition (contemplating openly the face of the Father), which was a new way of passing into the kingdom. Walter Kasper seems to have taken this line. He shows that Jesus lived in a thought context strongly marked by apocalyptic tendencies. On the basis of this mentality "it is impossible to separate the advent of the kingdom of God from eschatological sufferings, the coming of the Messiah from the messianic period of suffering. The announcement of the passion, conceived as the tribulation of eschatological times, is a component of the preaching having as object the coming of God's kingdom...From the proclamation of the kingdom there branches off, then, a direction that flows, with few deviations, into the very mystery of the Passion."(22)

Jesus' conflict with his adversaries takes place in an eschatological context. Jesus announced the end of the former age ("world" as it was, as *weltanschauung*) and the beginning of a new one. The conflict around His own person is connected with that between the old and new age, willed and accepted by Jesus to its extreme consequences. Jesus' death on the cross is not only the ultimate result of the courage he showed when he manifested himself to men, but it is the compendium of his message.(23)

Therefore, if the way to the kingdom is not a cosmic change but above all a *metanoia*, the fundamental liberation effected by Jesus is from a mistaken notion of the Kingdom. It is a kind

of demythologization of the Kingdom. P. Schoonenberg, among others, interprets it this way. In other fields he is a somewhat equivocal theologian. For him the “kenosis” (annihilation) spoken of in Philippians 2:7, does not refer to the Incarnation but to a choice made by the man Jesus during his earthly life, when he refused the role of a political messiah, because he felt the call to be a prophet in the sense of “servant” and in this suffering perceived a positive meaning. “The entire life of Jesus, above all his passion, is enveloped in a context of temptation...; to superimpose on the will of God, which demanded fidelity even to suffering, man’s will that aimed at success without suffering...”(24)

Gradually we near the very heart of the liberation Jesus brought us. If the cross is the door to the kingdom, this means that those who enter leave behind them the childish idea of a kingdom of earthly enjoyment. But, whoever, free from this attitude, enters the Kingdom, what “fullness” does he find? Jesus made it very clear that the liberated man is able to pass beyond the “law” finding, as Paul says later, its fullness in love (cfr. Mat. 5:17; Romans 13:10).

In Jewish thought contemporary to Jesus, the absolute consisted in the Torah, and outside that one could not and should not venture. There were two aspects, one theological and the other political, both very open to criticism and hence the direct target of Jesus’ message. Theologically speaking, especially since the return from exile, the Jews had so accentuated the transcendence of Yahve as to make Him practically inaccessible. So instead of an immediate and intimate access to God, they held that one could be united to Him only through the “mediation” of the law. The most precious ethical value of revelation was thus turned upside down. We can understand the pharisaic scandal Jesus gave when, as Son He went straight to his “Father – Abba” and taught the same thing to his disciples, promising them the Spirit of sons, not servants (cfr. Rom. 8:16:Gal, 4:6).

As for the political aspect, the absolutism of the law established the power of the priests and in the last analysis the civil structures. The Sadducees (priestly caste) collaborated with the Romans for very good reasons. And just as it was revolutionary, theologically speaking, to say that the love of the Father passed beyond and took the place of all ritual adoration and legal prescription, so it was revolutionary to say that love of mankind passed beyond legal prescriptions and is, in fact, the only key to interpreting the law. The sabbath is for man and not man for the sabbath (cfr: Mt. 2:17).

Historically speaking, the cross was for Jesus the epilogue of His boldness in throwing open the divine power to all men. Every single man has access to the divinity as a child to its father. Every man is superior to any kind of structure and can and should bend it to put it at the service of his fellow men, indeed to put himself at the service of others. J. Ratzinger says very well that “the source from which ‘christian’ faith originally sprang is the cross...Jesus’ crucifixion is his royalty; precisely as crucified this Jesus becomes Christ and king...”(25) While Pilate thought of liquidating Jesus when he gave him the title of “king”, he paradoxically transformed the cross into a standard for the struggle for mankind’s liberation.

It was not only in the Judaism of those times but still more within the imperial system of the Romans that the conflict broke out decisively. Christ, the Son of God crucified, came into conflict with Caesar, whose imperial cult, inspired by the ideology tinged with orientalism of an absolute king would also be Son of God. “The already demythologized myth and the myth that remained came face to face openly. The absolute pretense of the Roman god-emperor could

obviously not allow near it the changed kingly and imperial theology that grew in strength in Jesus' claim to be Son of God. Hence, the necessary birth of the "martyria" (testimony) "martyrium" that broke out in face of the provocation against the self-divinization of the political power."(26)

A Policy So As Not To Be Enslaved By Politics

The very fact that Christianity showed itself to be genuine, in its basics, even in a different context from the original one, shows clearly how its political aspect, even though authentic, is not limited within the events lived by the pre-paschal Jesus, even if they throw a good light on it. This means that, contrary to all the "reductive" positions taken up by some recent authors, the certain fact that Jesus never let himself be caught in any "party" of his times is more and more evident.

Galot, in his excellent synthesis, concludes that "to refute every political attachment in no way signifies a lesser commitment to the work of liberation. It shows a deeper and more absolute commitment. Jesus does not want to liberate a particular type of man specified by his social class or nation, but man as such, man in his wholeness and his full human value."(27) Congar too, who holds that the word and action of Jesus, while refuting temporal messianism, had a political impact, explains that this should be understood in the sense of a critical application with regard to all temporal values which claim to dominate absolutely, and he emphasizes that Jesus did not take on a program, nor a revolutionary, political liberation movement, not even in a social reform activity as such.(28)

J. B. Metz in particular has developed his political theology along these lines. From 1971 he began to speak of a future for the world that should emerge from the "memory of the Passion": "Christianity...strives to keep alive the memory of the Crucified Lord, this, specific 'memoria passionis', as a dangerous remembrance of liberty within the social systems of our technological civilization."(29) "Christian memory of the Passion in its theological content is an anticipatory remembrance. In it there is the expectation of a future determined for humanity as a future of the suffering, the hopeless, the oppressed, the injured and useless of this earth. Hence, christian memory of the passion does not simply and indifferently abandon political life to the play of social interests and forces that also presuppose a conflict that always favors the powerful and not the friend, besides bringing out always and only the value of that 'quantum' of humanity necessary to assure one's own interests. A fresh moral image is introduced by the memory of the passion into political life, a new way of imagining other people's sufferings from which should mature an overwhelming and disinterested bias toward the weak and the non-represented. Thus the christian memoria passionis can become the ferment of that new political life we are looking for our future as men."(30)

The "critical" aspect of the wisdom of the cross should then be brought out and appreciated. "The christian, beneath the cross, while engaged in the fight for liberation will not only have an original style but will always refuse to be totally identified with the claims and interests of society and will know how to maintain his distance from every system... Christianity should never be resigned to becoming a religion of society, an ideology... Christians, faithful to the cross, will always be strangers and migrants even in a classless society." (31)

This said, we also have to be attentive not to interpret the cross literally and timidly. “Acceptance of the cross does not authorize any sort of oppression but becomes a standard of the christian struggle for the restoration of justice ... the class conflict may reveal profoundly evangelical demands: the will to fight for justice, choice of the outcast, the need to alleviate the unjust crosses weighing down our brethren ... The great christian principle is not class conflict nor interclass collaboration. It is love of our neighbor, including our enemy, and commitment to justice because love does no injustice. In a society of discriminating classes, the class struggle (by the oppressed classes) to rise above discriminations and reach a classless society is not contrary to Christianity. We must remain upright though; by mystifying the cross we may also mystify the struggle...”(32)

Wisdom of the cross “today takes care of the tomorrow yet to come. While the builders build the palace, it takes care in secret of the stones rejected by the builders. While legislators formulate laws for the new society, wisdom of the cross is ready to be outside the law if love of mankind so needs. When, as is its desire, the marginal people manage to conquer power, it would at once be with those who had remained outside. Isn’t this perhaps the way faith cares for the future? Recognizing the glory of God in the Crucified, it condemns a priori all the glory of this world, impelling man’s hope forward beyond any possible fulfillment, does it not?”(33)

The various points of view of which we have given some extracts clearly show that we must not allow ourselves to be imprisoned within an earthly ideology. The cross sends us back always to God’s transcendence and He is the unique Liberator whose projects are completely superior to ours. Neither should we imprison ourselves in a kind of eschatological angelism that confuses the future exclusively with what happens after death. Christian transcendence coming from the cross has a well-known name: love. It is the victory of lover over justice, and it is the exigency that we should name “just” only a humanity based on love.

For this reason the wisdom of the cross can never be codified or institutionalized. “This surmounting of strict justice...comes from Christ Himself, who has brought liberation to man not because of a simple divine justice, but by that divine love that pardons sins by making his benevolence triumph over the injustice of sin. Far from enclosing itself within the frontiers of justice, love is unlimited and its goal is to draw man into a love without limits. Therefore, only charity can inspire a project of social reform that corresponds to evangelical orientations ... Only charity can give social justice its true meaning, that is, fraternal sharing and not a mere struggle between economic interests that try to harmonize, nor a simple compromise between social forces according to each one’s power. The real legitimate meaning of reaction against injustice can only come from charity; that is, the search for a society that is more equal because more animated by love. Without charity this reaction runs the risk of becoming a selfish claim and a grudging protest. Some painful situations can only be remedied by charity that no legal social system succeeds in either avoiding or eliminating.”(34)

The Last Word And Crucified Love

We have come now to the last “anthropological” dimension of the wisdom of the cross. Up to now we have seen it as animating a positive project, courageous and sure of its eschatological success. We have seen it as a stimulus to creativity, in that it is intrinsically orientated towards the unceasing overcoming of historical limitations. But doubtless the constituent element in

wisdom of the cross is also patience, hope against hope, the challenge of existence even when it would seem intra-historic failure is certain.

Theologians today give place to the wisdom of the cross in research and the finding of meaning in what seems without meaning. This seems to be L. Boff's line. "Christ's whole life was self-giving, a being-for-others, the attempt and the realization in his existence, of the overcoming of all conflicts. Living the original meaning of man as God willed when He made him to his image and likeness, judging and speaking always starting from him, Jesus revealed a life of extraordinary and original authenticity. With the proclamation of the kingdom of God He wanted to give an ultimate and absolute meaning to the totality of reality... In spite of the disaster and total failure, he did not despair, but trusted and believed to the end that God, in spite of all, would accept him. The nonsense had for him a secret and ultimate sense. The universal significance of Christ's life and death is then in the fact that he bore right to the end the basic conflict of human existence; to try to realize the absolute meaning of this world before God, in spite of hatred, misunderstanding, betrayal and condemnation to death. Evil for Jesus was not there to be explained, but to be assumed and overcome by love. This behavior of Jesus opened up new possibilities in human existence, a life of faith in an absolute sense even when faced with absurdity... The resurrection will reveal to its depths that to believe and persevere in the absurd and nonsense is not without sense."(35)

For E. Schillebeeckx too, "radical trust in God in spite of all the empirical historical circumstances was the kernel of the message and of the consequent behavior of Jesus' life, who, when all this was fulfilled nevertheless speaks of 'useless service'" (Lk. 17:7ff).(36) Jesus had, above all, to give meaning to the rejection of his message that he saw was coming during his preaching. Everything points to his perceiving the realization of his message – in the way that would please his Father – not so much "in spite of" his death, but rather "through" his death. At the supper, Jesus felt and understood his death as the ultimate and extreme service given to God's cause in that it was man's. The 'for you' in the sense of the total pro-existence of Jesus, was the historical intention of all his conduct and it was carried out till death. "All Jesus' life is the hermeneutic of his death. Within this there is profound salvific sense, that later on could be proclaimed by faith in various ways."(37)

In this absolute faith-hope are included all the human sufferings of history beyond all more or less theological rationalizing, Every "human history is ambiguous, with some glimpses of light and wide zones of impenetrable obscurity, a domain of knowing and non-knowing. Coexistence of sense and nonsense in this story, that is, history itself, is not completely susceptible to reasoning. ...Unreconciled and innocent suffering, in short the history of the passion of humanity, precisely in its shadowed zone, incapable of being situated either rationally or theoretically...accompany our story like some permanent 'epiphenomenon' in our situated liberty. Both philosophy and theology are helpless... There is too much innocent and absurd suffering to be rationalized ethically, hermeneutically or ontologically. And history witnesses man's powerlessness to realize a totally integrated human society without suffering... To believe in a universal meaning of history is possible only in a practice that seeks to overcome evil and suffering in virtue of a religious promise...

"The very heart of Jesus' message is God's sovereignty attentive to mankind. In spite of the 'historical' failure of this message, Jesus gave witness to his own indestructible certitude of

salvation-from-God, certitude based on an exceptional experience of “Abba” that human life is definitely meaningful...because the Father is greater than every suffering...”(38)

VI WISDOM OF THE CROSS AND THE TRUE FACE OF GOD

As has been repeated more than once in the preceding chapter, to state the question of soteriology involves not merely anthropology but also theology in the strict sense, that is, discourse about God. Evidently, a certain diffusion of atheism is partly caused by a distorted idea of God and this distortion has to do precisely with the way in which people think God conceives salvation (only outside of history or inside as well?) and the way to reach it (sacrificing man or improving him?). Hence, the pastoral importance of the possibility of having a better idea of God’s face, starting from the wisdom of the cross as we have been explaining it.

“Theology Of Glory” And “Theology Of The Cross”

To avoid too fragile a basis we adopt the explanation of the question as given by G. Moiola in his above-mentioned Christology. It deals “strictly with the relationship, to be formulated in rigorous terms, between the discourse on Jesus Christ and the discourse on God, in theology.”(1)

The protestant world especially urges in the direction “not only of a challenge of the claim to build up a discourse on God, according to the faith, that prescind from or does not hinge on the scandal of the cross, but more radically in the sense of a more or less effective bringing together of theology to Christology.”(2) For Luther the “*theologia crucis*” is the only legitimate one; God reveals himself supremely “*sub contrario*”, that is, in the Crucified, to proclaim the absolute inadequacy of human reason to reach his mystery. Understood are two basic supports of the fundamental “sinfulness” of historical man and the utter freedom of divine grace.

Barth renewed this position. For him “the revealing Word of God is Jesus Christ and hence Christ is a kind of universal ‘implication’. With slight exaggeration his theology has been called ‘*monochristian*’ or ‘*pan-christian*’”.(3) He does not say that “the affirmation of God-in-himself is a problem whose objectivity is possible only in Christ; but that God-in-Christ is a kind of primary evidence, a *primum logicum* for the believer...Christology, he said, is the criterion of theology.”(4)

The epilogue of this position we find in Bonhoeffer, who in the suffering Christ sees God himself suffering for the world. Faith is to let oneself be drawn along the way with Christ, to be involved in the messianic sufferings of God in Christ. “The God-made-present has in the essence of his presence assumed the structure of the Crucified; but the Crucified is not, so to speak, an event that happened to God, but the very law chosen by God to regulate his presence in the world, a presence within an absence. The Crucified who cannot be the essence of God as existence, can be his essence as presence, that is, in so far as he is related to the world.”(5)

“The ‘*christological objectivity*’ of God has a preponderant ethical-operative coloring...Christ is the ‘*signified*’ of the God hidden ‘*sub contrario*’, who is found ‘*in the deeds*’, participating in the tragedy of the world.”(6)

Catholic theology – withdrawing from the excesses which led to refer to Bonhoeffer the practically atheistic theologies such as “the Death of God” – renewed in its turn the idea of Jesus

as Definitive event of revelation. The divine economy (that is, its action in the world for salvation) manifests theology (that is, God's essence in itself). Thus the 'theologia gloriae' has tended to take second place, that is, theism based on reason, that still remains a catholic affirmation (man's natural knowledge of God).

Theistic affirmation certainly does not put every historically revealable theism on the same level. Indeed, it could never be other than "open" to the ultimate determination that came in fact from the "economy".(7)

Hence, an undeniable tension between Jewish theism and Christian theism, as also between the handling of God by the illuminists and the one now being constructed. "For a Catholic treatment of God, the immediate frame of reference is the 'economy', precisely as free, but homogeneous (true) and definitive coming of God himself in Jesus."(8)

The "Crucified God" of Moltmann

Of course, the one who went furthest along this line is Moltmann, in his work "The Crucified God". Though a protestant theologian, he draws out an appreciable dialogue with Catholic, especially German-language, theology. For him "christian faith stands or falls with knowledge of the Crucified, that is, with knowledge of god 'in' Christ crucified."(9) Unfortunately, we cannot analyze the whole work and we are well aware that it is difficult to appreciate an isolated section. Indeed, the first part of the work is like a "christological eschatology", that is, it asks how the future kingdom of God is present in the reality of the present. Asking "why" Christ himself was raised from the dead, we meet with the cross. "A resurrection without the cross would sound like a miracle and nothing else, a metamorphosis of glorification, abstract anticipation of the future. The resurrection of the crucified one is expectancy and hope for those without hope... beginning of the end of history centered in the sufferings of history, anticipation of God's future for the past of the dead and for those without hope".(10)

In the second part of his work Moltmann from the start draws a number of conclusions. We shall examine briefly the chapter in which he draws consequences for the concept of God. The title of the Chapter is, significantly, that of the whole work; so the central place it occupies is clear.

From the debate on "the death of God" the author concludes that "now the christological problem of Jesus in the last analysis implies that of God. What God motivates christian faith: the Crucified or one of the gods of religion, of race and of class?"(11) Metaphysical theism becomes a target: the immovable mover does not give substance to being, but the cross of Christ is the redemption of being and foundation of the new creation.

Besides criticizing theism, the theology of the cross is critical also of atheism. Like the rejected metaphysics, it starts from the presupposition that the world is the image of the divinity and obviously denies that any kind of God can be deduced from an unjust and suffering world. On the contrary, atheism is precisely the rejection of these injustices which crush man. But the theology of the cross "draws into itself the 'metaphysical revolt', because it recognizes in the cross of Christ a revolt operating in the realm of metaphysics, or better still, a revolt operating in God himself; it is in fact, God Himself who loves and suffers in his love the death of Christ".(12)

So, God suffers? An image of an impassible God is thrown aside resolutely; the indifferent, “apathetic” God, familiar to the Greek philosophers, that echoes also in Christian thought. In the Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysical context it seems absurd to attribute suffering to God. But Moltmann admits the possibility of mutation and hence of suffering in God Himself. We must exclude every kind of suffering in God which implies lack of being, but not that capacity for suffering which is born of love. God’s immutability should not be understood as absolute, but only relative; it does not exclude the capacity of active suffering, the suffering of love.

Moltmann very boldly holds that the cross of Christ reveals God precisely as Trinity. “In the event of the cross the divine persons are constituted in their reciprocal relationship; in the event of the cross comes the ‘history of God’. On the cross the Father and Son are constituted as such, in that they are distinct and separated in the deepest mode of abandonment: the Father as the one who abandons the Son to suffering and death and the Son as the one who is abandoned to suffering and death. At the same time they are united most intimately in the “handing over”, the Father as the one who hands over his Son to the agony and abandonment and suffers from it, and the Son as the one handed over who willingly hands himself over to the agony and death. From this event between the Father and the Son on the cross issues the Spirit who justifies, reveals to the future and creates life. God could still be spoken of, but in a supplementary way, intending by ‘God’ not the impassible God of metaphysics, but the unity of that dialectical history rich in tensions that was lived by the Father, Son and Spirit on the cross of Golgotha.”(13)

Moltmann thinks that this introduction of suffering in God – though seen so clearly in a trinitarian key – is linked up with a certain “pathetic Jewish theology” that is being rediscovered. “The biblical prophets had no ‘idea’ of God but they understood themselves and their people in God’s situation that they called God’s pathos. Prophecy in its core is not foreseeing the future but the contemplation of God’s actual pathos, his impatience with Israel’s infidelity, his apprehension for his right and honor in the world. It is a pathos rooted in his freedom and coincides with the profound interest God has – an interest that causes suffering – for man and his world.”(14)

It seems sometimes that Moltmann tends to “conceive God as crucified for a theoretical reason, the very exigency of love to express itself in sharing the suffering of the person loved. But elsewhere it seems he arrives at this concept of a crucified God for exegetical reasons. Returning to the history of salvation, he shows that suffering and the cross are necessary traits of God’s existence from the moment he has willed to set up a covenant with mankind. From then on, God will also undergo the injuries and sufferings for his people that man’s disobedience brings him. What the Old Testament calls God’s wrath is not an anthropomorphic category of transposition of inferior human affections in God, but in that of the divine pathos. His anger is wounded love and hence a manner of reacting to man. Love is the source and the deep ground of possibility for ‘divine anger’.”(15)

The Crucified God In Catholic Thought

We cannot stop at other interesting exponents of protestant theology. For example, the Japanese Kitamori who as far back as 1946 had written his essay on “The Pain of God”. He thinks of God who suffers to have to pardon and in whom the tremendous tension between love and anger forms pain. Besides biblical theology, the author refers to the basic Japanese

experience of 'tsurasa', that is, sorrow in which, for love of someone else loved, one offers the sacrifice of what one holds most dear, one's own life, or the life of a beloved son.(16)

Among Catholic theologians, J. Galot takes a balanced position in "Mystery of God's Suffering", of which we shall give a summary here.(17) "The statement 'God suffered' is very ancient. To the Christians of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch writes, "Let me be an imitator of the passion of my God."(18) Patristic theology had already adopted the "communication of idioms" by which what had been assumed by his human nature was attributed to the divine person of the Word. From the fifth century "the attribution of suffering to the Word had been formulated in the most astonishing and precise statement: 'One of the trinity has suffered.'" (19) But even recent Catholic theology has refused to go beyond a simple appropriation. "Galtier charges as a 'morbid dream' the idea of a Christ accessible even in his divine being to what constitutes the weakness and misery of men."(20)

More recent exegesis, however, has found ways to overcome this obstacle by referring to the Pauline hymn of Philippians 2, that seems to lead "before the nudity of the cross, to the more fundamental stripping of the Incarnation".(21) There is an inner sacrifice, a certain moral suffering that touches the person of the Son. The Passion would be its apex. "In the human life of Jesus everything reveals God, but suffering is the most intense human experience, and therefore most able to show what God is..."(22) "The divine power is love. Hence, this power is able to plunge to the ultimate depth of suffering."(23)

To conclude his research, Galot says that "Christ's suffering is not divine...But it has a repercussion on His Person. It is a manifestation of kenosis...touching the Word inasmuch as He is Son..." (24)

The second part of the work is concerned with "the Father's participation in the incarnation and passion." According to John, only Jesus brings us the ultimate truth about the Father. "Christ himself is the primary criterion of the whole doctrine on God." (25) But Jesus reveals that the Father is he who sends the son as victim. "The first sacrifice was not the Son's being put to death by the servants, but the Father's who appears supremely responsible for the whole sad happening."(26) It might be possible to go further and speak of a Father's "compassion" in the face of the death of the Son. Mystics and artists reached this intuition before theologians do.(27)

To support theology, Galot deals in a third part with "the problem of God's suffering in the offense caused by sin," and the fourth with "suffering and redemptive love." "The analysis of the offense demands a basic distinction between the divine being, neither diminished nor injured, and divine love that is wounded by the hostile attitude of the sinner... God's suffering in the Passion is not, strictly speaking, suffering of the divine being, but suffering of divine love, and more exactly, of the love the divine persons give to mankind."(28) With the distinction between necessary being and gratuitous love(29) the intelligibility of suffering in God is preserved. "In itself there is nothing in suffering that contradicts love. Its nature is not such as to diminish moral perfection."(30)

The views prevailing since the time of Anselm are thus exploded. "God does not impose suffering on the sinful man, but, man imposes suffering on God."(31) In this case suffering is not an evil, rather the taking on of suffering to give mankind heartfelt love "brings the union of suffering and joy in the depths of the heart, and transforms suffering into profound joy."(32)

Theodicy is following new ways. “In the economy of providence, suffering is not a weight to crush others, even for a higher end. It is a weight the Father primarily assumes in himself ...If the Father himself suffers, that suffering takes on a new face...”(33) “The true God can only be he who in his love suffers for and with man...Only this conception of God, capable of suffering and who suffers, proves what is said of God in scripture and manifests the face of God who is love.”(34)

Other theologians besides Galot have reached the same conclusions. For example, in his own way, Hans Kung in the ponderous treatise “Incarnation of God.” (35) “According to the schema of two natures, he affirms that God does not suffer in himself but in the Son, in the flesh. But to this he adds that, given our dialectical way of preaching on the divine properties, it is also possible to understand how God has the faculty to alienate himself for mercy and to include sin (his opposite) in himself, supporting and remitting it.”(36) These theological advances seem to some a little too audacious and the old theories die hard, though it cannot be denied that “with these the meaning of the cross as revelation of God has been deepened – of a God who can suffer, be humble and merciful, focusing on the definitive character of such a revelation.”(37)

The Glory Of The Cross According To Von Balthasar

Perhaps better than any other author working along these lines is Hans Urs Von Balthasar from whose work, “Theology, the New Covenant”, we extract some thoughts, the seventh volume of his monumental work, “Glory, A Theological Aesthetics”.(38) At the beginning of this work he recalls Romano Guardini’s words: “In a sense appropriate to him alone, God truly experiences a ‘destiny’ in this world. And He is such that He can experience it. And this power of experiencing it is the ultimate glory, identical with that given by his being ‘love’. The cross is the symbol par excellence of this reality. Whoever tampers with it closes the world in a total incomprehensibility.”

The paradox is only apparent. Already in the Old Testament “glory” was understood as “Kabod”, that is, weight, solemnity. With Barth, Von Balthasar understands that the “beauty” of God is not derived from a general metaphysical concept, but the solemn self-revelation he himself chooses. “God is not God because He is beautiful but He is beautiful because He is God.”(39)

The work consists of three parts. The first (*Verbum caro factum*) states the “weight” by which God presents himself. When Jesus appears the future cross is already in sight. “The image of the Messiah appearing should be permeated by that of the suffering servant of God (for a Jew this image could be reconciled with the first).”(40) Baptism is interpreted in a soteriological sense(41); the Passion is foreshadowed in the narrative of the temptations.(42) Jesus’ preaching, too, immediately sets in motion the adverse powers that will lead Jesus to the cross(43), so much so that in reality “the center of the Word will be non-word”, death, “impossible impact of the absolute weight of God on the other, who has nothing in common with God...a point without form.”(44) In the extreme cry of crucified agony “the word reaches its summit and hence is no longer articulated, it tears the last breath of its diaphragm”; its heart is symbolically outside the veil between God and man; blood and water gush forth, God Himself pours Himself out; He pours outside Himself that Covenant which presupposes a couplet. The mediator is passed over

where now there is only one. Where the word dies away, the real new one rings out, the broken heart of God.”(45)

The central point of the reflection is in the chapter on “the Weight of the Cross”, that attempts to interpret the death of Jesus as *Kabod*. Here the wisdom of the cross enters into the very mystery of God. While avoiding Bulgakov’s sociological exaggerations, it is possible to understand that kenosis “is based on the ‘altruism’ of the divine persons as pure relations in the intra-divine life of love. This altruism is a first form of kenosis that consists in the creation (especially of man as free), since the creator hands over, in a way, a part of his freedom into the hands of his creature. But in the last analysis he can only be so daring because of a previous vision and a taking into consideration of the second and truer kenosis of the cross, in which he gathers up and passes beyond the uttermost consequences of creaturely freedom. Thus, the cross of Christ is inscribed in the creation of the world from its foundation, the lamb of God is immolated from the beginning of the world (cfr. Revelation 13:8)...”(46)

It is necessary however, in order to keep a right balance, to say that “if it is true that the “cross”...reveals something of the immanent law of the Trinity, it is not in any way possible to derive from this inner law a necessity...Yet, in Jesus Christ, abasement and self-emptying do not contradict God’s own essence, but in an unsuspected way are even of the same measure.”(47)

The second part of the work (*Vidimus gloriam eius*) examines the meaning of “glory” in the New Testament. But inevitably, it returns to the cross. “Glory is the divine self-affirmation in the other than self...God is incomprehensible and the more He shows himself to our faculty of knowing, the more His incomprehensibility increases...All this, for a negative theology in general, has no value as theorem except for the most concrete of all theologies, which Paul named ‘the foolishness of God’ in the cross of Christ (I Cor. 1:25).”(48)

“In the reciprocal non-existence of the Father and Son, as revealed by obedience and the cross, the ultimate word is God’s, that no thought or praxis whatever can reach...This word is inaccessible self-expression and self-dedication of God. The extreme gesture of trinitarian love in giving is beyond the Hebrew, Samaritan and pagan images of God, and for them it becomes the “telos”: ‘videbunt in quem transfixerunt’. Henceforth there will be nothing more to be seen on God’s part. This will be and will remain his complete revelation at the same time as his most complete hiddenness...”(49)

Von Balthasar then dedicates a third section (*In laudem gloriae*) to the Holy Spirit as ‘glorification’ of God in the world. The heart of this part is the duty of meeting God in our brethren for whom Christ died. In accord with Ephesians 2:14f., “The horizontalism of love of our neighbor that is open and universal (e.g., ecclesially unlimited) descends from the vertical line of its origin (on the cross) and comes to exist in the common eschatological regard turned, in the same Spirit, towards God and Father who is the fount, in His Son on the cross, of all love and all unity...Jesus stretched out on the cross towards sinners is the foundation of unity between the love of God and love of our brethren. It is God’s own foundation who sacrificed His Beloved for the world...a divine foundation that in Christ confers on every ‘neighbor’ even the ‘furthest away’, the value of a being personally loved by God and neighbor to God himself. And this is so before any question of what we name organized and missionary church...”(50)

The glory of the cross, then, embraces also the concept of church, which is considered as a 'provisional' situation on the way to the parousia. "Certainly the church lives...since Easter...but always on the march...and in the direction of the cross, a cross we have never thrown behind us as a "factual reality" now passed, but towards which the whole history of mankind travels, as towards its own 'eschaton' (Matt. 24:3) 'videbunt in quem transfixerunt' (Rev. 1:7)." (51) "The church is founded, sent, commissioned from the day of Easter. But she keeps Good Friday in her heart, where human form and God's visibility is emptied, quenched, buried. A Church that carries this mystery in her heart can be only a tent for a pilgrim people, that is continually taken down and folded up to be carried elsewhere..." (52)

Truly this is the wisdom of the cross, revolution of all our conceptions, that should serve us as solid and courageous basis for all the pastoral practice and planning of our era.

VII THE WISDOM OF THE CROSS TODAY

Contemporary Presentations Of the Spirituality Of The Cross

In an article on Pastoral Ministry published in 1975, (1) we pointed to a "re-flowering of the spirituality of the passion." Today, in fact the discussion on spirituality includes the global verification of faith through an authentic experience of it in actual circumstances. No other experience bears the guarantee of the authenticity in the Spirit as much as that of the cross. In the New Testament we already see the central place of the cross in the liberating message of the Messiah. The more the cross is embraced in the service of our neighbor, so much the more satanic power is overcome and eliminated. However, today the spirituality of the cross needs reformulation, for it has been damaged by a kind of perfectionistic and "dolorist" individualism, and by a dogmatism tinted with penal legalism. We can, instead, express a wisdom of the cross that proclaims the definitive victory of the God and Father of Jesus Christ over the world.

Already in 1974 [Parola e vita](2) we had argued that "it is only the crucified God who truly saves." From the necessity that salvation embraces man in his totality, his historicity and his relationship with the world of today, we showed that the cross, paradoxically, is salvific precisely because it is directed towards what is humanly most precious and acceptable, love; and in the power of the Spirit it starts a new and definitive world which returns to the Father with the fruitful sacrifice of existence forever raised on the cross.

An excellent collection of studies is in "The Cross, Hope of Christians".(3) In it, among others, D. Barsotti says, "the cross can never be a mere symbol of suffering but is rather sign and sacrament of a divine mystery"(4), which is the very mystery of divine glory, of which we are called to have an "apophatic" that is, silent and contemplative knowledge, negative and obscure. In the mystery of the cross, God unites the extremes, and in this unity realizes salvation..."(5)

In the same volume Fr. Rossano notes that in the New Testament writings, the kerygma of the cross appears in various stages of articulation, the first more archaic, simple and elementary, the later, more theologically rich, dynamic and elaborated.(6) There is no end to reflection, and contemplation should be aware it is faced with a mystery. Yet the experience of the Church is able to discover and find to the end of the world ever new elements of content, that gather up and explain values and aspects of the kerygma of the cross.(7)

Note the really difficult challenge facing the pastoral worker: he has first of all to take the fact from the New Testament and then confront its relationship (decisive today) with men, the 'propter nos' perennially present in the evangelic message. How? D. Amalfitano gives expression to a fairly common thought when he states that "our christian conscience has borrowed extensively a theory that has grown to be more and more crude and rough: the theory of expiation... If we stop at a God of exact, squared-up balance of accounts between giving and having, we are still in paganism, with a sadistic Father, a God of Freudian memory that makes his message lack credibility... The cross is no mere cog wheel of an injured and repaired right, but, above all, the radicality of love totally given; this is the gift and coherence of the cross."(8)

A sign of this need is the courageous and stimulating article "Cross", of G. Mattai, in the supplement for the IV edition of the "Dizionario Enciclopedico di Teologia Morale."(9) He sums up the actuality of the staurological thesis as related to the concept of God and with regard to Christology, the world, history, the church and ecumenism. He then develops the contribution of the wisdom of the cross to the general situation of Christian morality.

"The cross of the risen (Christ) is the touchstone of authenticity of christian action and all its contents are qualified by it...For the christian, like all other men and women, it is commitment to the struggle for liberation; but he will have his own original style, refusing to be totally identified with the claims and interests of society...The cross, which judges all things, forbids the absolutizing of the liberation project.(10) Such projects are historically marked and therefore limited. The 'memoria crucis' does more than make a preferential option for all oppressed peoples, crucified in various ways by alienation both old and new; it urges men to take their distances from dominant governments and systems never making them into idols, but joining the struggle for liberation with a critical commitment. It urges them to demythologize power in the most radical forms of the historical revolutions, that often turn into a simple change of the top persons without a real metanoia, or in lay language, without a cultural revolution."(11)

The Cross In The Spiritual Pilgrimage Today

Although there are necessary applications to be made of the wisdom of the cross in public life, we have to transform people in their hearts.

Worth noting is the large place A. Marana-ranche gives to the cross in his study "The Life of Liberation...Orientations of Spiritual Life". (12) The cross steps in when we have to take important decisions. "Every spiritual decision is a Passion vigil, that is, an anticipation of death, the most difficult thing possible for a man; the sign through which his deep faith is recognizable, worthy of the Christ we have made profession to follow."(13) Jesus' experience in the cenacle, when he gave meaning and value to his death, making his destiny into a free act and changing this tremendous burden into a message of love, is reproduced. Death is not a fatal and mere biological event, but the whole human life seen in the sign of loss of self for love, with Pauline "quotidie morior".(14)

"Only the mystic manages to carry out fully the fundamental human duty of bringing death to the centre of daily life..." (15) Therefore, we have to overcome the idea of the cross as a simple "trial" and still more that of the cross as "disgrace". (16) Contemplation of the passion should be in a trinitarian key(17): theologians themselves have expressed the paradoxical "Passion of the Impassible" by teaching that the first cross of the Word is His Incarnation. The "passing" to the

Father then becomes the revelation (limitation and analogy) of this steep descent. The cross is total obedience to the Father, unconditional self-abandonment to mankind, terrible torture of senses and heart, but also the 'only way to liberation'. (18) "Victorious over the powers of darkness, the One who died on the cross and was laid in the tomb is now forever alive, absolute Lord of all determinism: mystery of the liberty of Christ as of every authentic human liberty."(19)

Another spiritual and sapiential presentation of the cross is that of Fr. R. Regamey, "The Cross of Christ and the Cross of the Christian".(20) To the man who protests at the scandal of suffering it is right to say that the cross does not demand explanation but the Presence of God.(21) Therefore, the field should be cleared of negative ideas of the cross, for certainly "if the language of the cross is given its purity and fullness, it will in some way reach the 'heart' of modern man."(22) After examining carefully what the cross means to the Man Jesus, one can then go on to the decision to "complete" what is wanting to the Passion, embracing the cross positively in an ecclesial framework. The author, in ending his study, gives useful and practical suggestions to apply to the sacramental life of the faithful.

Practical Forms Of Pastoral Theology Of The Cross

The limitations of this course prevent us from presenting all possible pastoral applications of the wisdom of the cross. We shall simply speak of a few positions which emerged from the International Congress on the Wisdom of the Cross.

D. Grasso illustrated "The Approach To The Cross In a Secularized World."(23) The world tries to free itself from suffering without succeeding, rather creating new forms, or ending up in desperation, or else "feeling that there should be a reply to the problem of the apple, but not knowing if there really is one, or if his presentiment is only a 'projection' of a need that he has to have if he is to live."(24) Only the cross of Christ can offer a positive answer. Yes, life is worth living, because evil has a meaning through which a plan is realized – a plan which will have its fulfillment. Man's continual failure is only an appearance; it is the path to victory. The Son of God assures us of this, having passed through the most complete failure and come to the resurrection. "Have confidence," He says from the heights of the cross, "I have overcome the world," that is, evil.

G. Cardaropoli notes that the wisdom of the cross demystifies erroneous social and ecclesial practices, and that the "theologia crucis" is just taking its first steps. (25) "The church is victor and expands when she is persecuted. Her march forward seems irreversible: imperial structures and culture are overcome...When she has respected this criterion, 'he has saved by dying', that is, received glory from his death, she progresses and becomes renewed. But when she deviated from this methodology she has had impediments and complications."(26) The development of these positions imply a shift from a pastoral approach of power and defense to a pastoral service. "The choice of methodology of the cross is not a novelty. It is of the essence of Christianity; hence an aspect of her perennial existence. But it has to be put into practice. This supposes an effective conversion of everyone, from the Roman Pontiff to the bishops, priests, religious, lay folk of every type. World renewal cannot go forward unless from the self-reconstruction of the Church."(27)

Cardinal Ugo Poletti is clearly a “converted” pastor, treating of “Cross and social exigencies of a modern metropolis.”(28) The mystery of the cross cannot be reduced to a limited dimension of personal, private devotion. It is an essentially social fact, all the more actual and incisive where the reality of men who are suffering is more concentrated. Precisely in the metropolis, where injustice and suffering reach extreme limits and terrifying dimensions; in a global and collective suffering, new conditions of justice and solidarity can be generated, provided millions of men are taken out of their anonymity, men who suffer with no hope of escaping to a different life. Jesus Christ on the cross is not anonymous; he is THE MAN, He is everyman. The Man who fights and wins over every form of violence and death. He is the only guarantor of every form of personal and social justice. We should give the just and christian name of the cross to the daily passion of mankind, to enable them to assume the capacity of building up what all are expecting...higher values.(29)

NOTES

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- 3) Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 2
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- 5) “La fede, nella storia e nella società”, Brescia 1978, pp. 99ff.
- 6) Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 13
- 7) *Ibid.*, 8
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- 3) Milano, Rusconi, 1973, p. 236
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- 5) p. 72
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- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 124
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- 5) Divine Revelation, 19

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- 10) Ibid. p. 96
- 11) "Cristologia", Proposta sistematica, p.m., Milano, p. 192
- 12) Ibid. P. 192
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- 15) Ibid. p. 197
- 16) Ibid. pp. 198ff.
- 17) Ibid. p. 210
- 18) Ibid. p. 199
- 19) Ibid. pp. 192f.
- 20) A. Lapple, "Gesù di Nazareth", Ed. Paoline, 1974, p. 95
- 21) Ibid. p. 96
- 22) Moiola, op. cit., p. 199
- 23) Orientamenti attuali circa la psicologia umana di Cristo, in "Teologia del Presente, 1972, pp.240-252
- 24) "La psicologia di Cristo", in "Teologia del Presente", 1973, pp. 109-123
- 25) P. 383
- 26) C. Porro, "Sviluppi recenti della teologia della croce" op. cit. p. 383ff.
- 27) "Jesus devant sa mort dan L'evangile di Marc", Paris, 1970, pp.106f.
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- 26) Ibid. p. 175
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