

Two understandings of the cross in the Corpus Paulinum

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In this presentation we will try to define the meaning(s) and function(s) of the cross (crosses) and the crucifixion(s) in the Pauline letters (1 Cor, Gal) and in the writings of the late Pauline tradition (Col, Eph). But our goal is beyond the merely linguistic horizon. We look for the good news expressed in many languages, operating in many cultural contexts, living in every time not in uniformity and continuity of development, but in “symphonicity” (to use a term coined by von Balthasar and popularized by Sting) of truth.

In studying some parts of Corpus Paulinum we should be sensitive to the dynamic of communication between Paul (or pseudo-Paul) and the community of the Church. This can be achieved, using the results of rhetorical analysis. In this way we can place the material of our paper in the context of the life of the first Christian communities avoiding the danger of looking for anachronistic solutions within historical texts.

The cross and the crucifixion in 1 Cor 1,10-4,21

The motifs of the pericope 1 Cor 1,10-31 are wisdom and strength, but wisdom is dominant and presented with a wide variety of linguistic expressions. True wisdom and also true strength call for unity. Any division (*sci,sma*) is an impairment of wisdom and strength leaving no place for variety. This unity is rationally founded: on one mind and one decision (1 Cor 1,10). The opposite of unity is not only division but also strife (*e;rij*) – a dynamic way to express the static notion division, the process of confrontation, a struggle between different groups of followers linked to different leaders (vv. 12-13). Paul refuses to be one of them. He chooses to be a non-leader, non-baptizer (v. 14), because a baptizer is a teacher and leader of the community. Paul is and wants to be called an apostle (1,1), one destined to death (4,9).

We should draw some conclusions about the cross and crucifixion from this passage in 1 Corinthians. The principal issue in the narratio of the epistle is the problem of disunity in the Church contrasted with the unique salvific power of Christ expressed by his crucifixion for the sake of the Church. The rejection of the humble way of salvation, of the cross as the strength of God, is the lack of wisdom. But this wisdom is available only by divine revelation in Christ. The cross is really an obstacle (*ska,ndalon*, 1,23) to the knowledge of God’s wisdom. In the argumentatio Paul tries to explain why this salutary wisdom was neglected by Gentiles and by Jews. The understanding of Christ’s cross is the result of faith in historical Jesus crucified on the strength of a decision of the rulers, Gentile and Jews. The believers in Christ abstain as Jesus did, from joining in the game of status and power.

The Cross and Law in Galatians.

To be con-crucified (Gal 2,19) corresponds to another verb with prefix *sun-*: *sunisthmi* in Gal 2,18. The first reference may be explained in a lexicon, but is very hard to understand in its actual context. On a literal level the relationship between rebuilding a destroyed house and the condition of a trans-

gressor is not obvious. Destruction and construction here are metaphors with an obscure meaning. The key could be in the noun “transgressor”. If we follow Paul’s reasoning in Rom 2,27, we see the transgression in its relation to Law. It is not circumcision or the lack of it that results in guilt, but the fact that a person is subject to what is prescribed by the Law. Transgression only arises where the person involved is regarded as “under” the Law (Ga 4,4). In Ga 2,18 the status of transgressor is declared or attributed by an interested person (συνιστάνω). Paul declares himself to be con-crucified (συνεσταύρωμαι) with Christ. The first verb is active, the second is passive, so Paul because of his decision to be in the conflict with Law is treated as Christ was, by the defenders of Law. The final fragment of the epistle, written with Paul’s own hand, starts in Gal 6,11. The place of this fragment in the overall literary structure explains its redundancy. Similarly to what he has done in 1 Cor 1,31 and 2,2 Paul comes back to the cross as something to boast about (καυχῆσθε, Gal 6,14). In this short personal remark of Paul we can see something new. Boasting is contrasted with persecution (διωγμοί, Gal 6,12). In both cases Paul uses the active, verbal form in order to present the situation of an individual Christian and of a community as dynamic. Who is responsible for this persecution is not clear. It may refer to some harassment of Christians in Asia Minor. Who is the persecutor in this case? We must consider the internal conflict in the Church provoked by Jewish Christians not ready for Paul’s revised definition of salvation. The εὐπροσώποι ἐν σαρκί, (apparently kind people) tried to find a compromise but without success. Paul is persuaded of the need to confront the salvation granted by Christ with the Jewish idea of self-salvation by fulfilling of Law. Only salvation by the cross of Christ is able to open the way to a new creation (6,15). In 2 Cor 5,17 the issue of the new creation appears also in the context of Christ’s death for us, leading to our duty to die for others. The new creation is a metaphor for new life given by Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom 6,4). The Christian life is not the life of a Christian or of the Church but the life of Christ with his cross, and first of all with his love and his radical gift. The cross in the Pauline epistles is a kind of action, a life style, a choice. We live through the cross because it was a crucial part of Christ’s experience. It is the first step on the road of new life.

The cross in post-Pauline epistles

The post-Pauline epistles do not use the verbal form σταυρωθῆναι. It seems merely a grammatical observation, but in point of fact it is very significant theological datum. The cross in Col and Eph is presented from a different perspective than in 1 Cor or Gal. It is more a static situation than an event. We can see it in comparative analysis of Col 1,15-20 and Eph 2,13-19. The first of the texts is sometimes called a Christological hymn. The rhetorical function of the pericope (narratio) is easier to describe in a convincing way. Thus in Col 1,15-20 we look for the fundamental thought-pattern of all the epistles. The complexity of the fragment makes this task very hard. The connections with Wis are an indication of the intellectual atmosphere in which the fragment was written. The verse most important for us (1,20) is an obvious Christian addition to the borrowed wisdom material. The sub-unit containing this fragment (strophe II, vv. 18b-20) is focused on the topic of reconciliation. The hymn and the entire letter lead to this point. Conflict and division are the main problems of the text, but it is different from the social and political conflict in the Corinthian Church. The reality referred to is not the disturbed relationship between the believers but between them and the perfect form, completeness (πλήρωμα, v. 19) of the cosmos. The neutral form τὰ ἀκίνητα (v. 20) shows the impersonal character of this divided reality. The diversity of cosmic elements is a fact but the cosmos can’t exist in this imperfect form. The πλήρωμα isn’t a balance of material factors but always the divine dimension expressed in

material form (Col 2,9). In the phrase *plh,rwma thj qeo,thj* the second noun is used as an adjective (completeness of divinity). This completeness is related to corporeality and can't be reached without the material factor. In Christ the same completeness of divinity is dwelling (1,19). The terrestrial and the heavenly is reconciled by Christ's blood on the cross. Also the reconciliation described in Col is not social but cosmic.

This vision of the cross is very close to the Valentinian gnostic myth. Salvation is presented (as also in writings of Irenaeus of Lyon) as knowledge. In gnostic teaching we may see ideas from post-Pauline letters (pre-gnosis). But the reader is struck by the fundamental difference between post-Pauline theology of salvation and the gnostic one. The first is founded on the principle of salvation operated by Christ and realized by his passion on the cross, in the gnostic doctrine salvation is the result of the true revelation, a merely intellectual fact. Christ's cross is not just the place of Christ's suffering, but a form of repairing the cosmos. The human self-salvation was realized exclusively in an intellectual way.

These different ideas of salvation brings about different meanings of wisdom. In the Pauline letters wisdom is described as the divine project of salvation for the world. The believer participates in it by accepting Christ's attitude expressed in the death on the cross. In post-Pauline letters we find wisdom understood as an internal mystery of God revealed to man.

The diversity of theological interpretations of salvation does diminish belief in the Saviour himself. The way to describe the mystery of salvation may be different, but it is always the same salvation given to us by Jesus Christ.