

# THEOLOGY OF THE ‘PASCHAL MYSTERY’

## EXPLANATION OF THE ‘PASCHAL MYSTERY’ IN THE NEW THEOLOGY

### Importance

This novel concept is presented by the official documents as the key to interpreting the liturgical reforms

- *Sacrosanctum Concilium* mentions the ‘paschal mystery’ 12 times, explaining it as:
  - Including Christ’s Passion, resurrection and ascension, by which Christ accomplished His task of redeeming mankind and giving glory to God;
  - Man enters the paschal mystery by baptism;
  - The Church continues to celebrate it through coming together to read the Scriptures and celebrate the Eucharist<sup>1</sup>.
- The Declaration *Inter Oecumenici*<sup>2</sup> states that:

*First of all, however, it is essential that everybody be persuaded that the scope of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is not limited merely to the changing of liturgical rites and texts. Rather its aim is to foster the formation of the faithful and that pastoral activity of which the liturgy is the summit and the source (see Const. Art. 10). The changes in the liturgy which have already been introduced, or which will be introduced later, have this same end in view. The thrust of pastoral activity which is centered on the liturgy is to give expression to the Paschal Mystery in people’s lives. (n. 5-6)*
- John Paul II: *The first principle [behind the liturgical reform of Vatican II] is the ‘actualization’ of the Paschal mystery of Christ in the Church’s liturgy.*<sup>3</sup>

*The Paschal Mystery is Christ at the summit of the revelation of the inscrutable mystery of God.*<sup>4</sup>
- Benedict XVI: *[The most important essential idea of Vatican II is] the Paschal Mystery as the center of what it is to be Christian – and therefore of the Christian life, the Christian year, the Christian seasons.*<sup>5</sup>

### Concept of the ‘Paschal Mystery’

Until the 20th century the expression “Paschal Mystery” had no special meaning in the writings of theologians – Today, however, it seems to have taken on a different meaning and a significant importance

Supposedly the Paschal Mystery is just a new way of looking at the dogma of the Redemption. Traditional concept of the Redemption is too negative, overemphasizes satisfaction of justice, sufferings of Christ in His Passion, cooperation of man in these sufferings – Paschal Mystery restores the true

---

<sup>1</sup> All paraphrases taken from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §5-6

<sup>2</sup> Following the approval of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in December 1963, the Holy See published 5 documents that were labelled “Instruction[s] for the Right Application of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council”. The first of these, *Inter Oecumenici*, was published on Sept. 26, 1964. The others were published in 1967 (*Tres abhinc annos*), 1970 (*Liturgicae Instaurationes*), 1994 (*Varietates legitimae*), 2001 (*Liturgiam authenticam*)

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, Dec. 4, 1988

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, §9

<sup>5</sup> Address to the Clergy of Rome, Feb. 14, 2013

perspective by emphasizing the importance of love, the initiative of God, and the new life of the Resurrection

*Some are scandalized in their sense of justice, and think that such a Redemption is an unanswerable objection to the goodness of God. If God were truly Father, would He be so exacting in His accounts, and would He take out His anger on His beloved Son? In the theology of the Paschal mystery, one does not meet with such pitfalls. (Roguet, *Qu'est-ce que le mystère pascal*)*

Paschal Mystery no longer wishes to consider the Passion of Christ as a propitiatory offering to divine justice offended by sin – requires some new theological concepts regarding sin and the redemption: ignoring the question of justice, the redemption is now the work of love whereby God reveals the infinite charity with which He pursues man, even when man sins.

### **a. New Theology of Sin**

Starting Principle: Sin incurs no debt in justice with regard to God, just as God gains nothing from the gifts His creatures give to Him, so He loses nothing through sin – Thus sin must not be looked upon from the perspective of the divine anger

Man's sin seems to harm only himself and society without being prejudicial to God. Sin does not offend the justice of God, but offends only His love insofar as it constitutes a refusal of this love.<sup>6</sup>

Response of Traditional Theology: While it is obvious that sin takes nothing away from God's nature, nevertheless it does attack His external glory, prejudicing His right to be adored and obeyed. One can offend the honor of God (and so owe reparation) without touching His nature. In classic theology, sin is an offense against the honor of God.

God has in fact created all things for His own glory, and man must direct all of his actions to that end – By refusing to give due honor to God, the sinner makes himself God's enemy and incurs a debt against His justice.

New theology believes that to make God into a jealous defender of His own honor would be to obscure His liberality. It maintains that God's love for us never lessens, even when our hearts would be closed to it. (see 1992 CCC, §219-20)

Consequence: Since God's love endures in spite of sin, and since His justice demands no satisfaction, it would be contrary to God's goodness to punish us for our faults.

The unhappiness that comes from sin, therefore, comes only from man himself or from creation, but not from God.

New Catechism speaks of hell, only considering it as self-exclusion from the love of God<sup>7</sup>, and never as a punishment that God inflicts on man, the obstinate sinner

---

<sup>6</sup> See 1992 CCC, §1849-50: *Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. Sin is an offense against God (Ps. 51:6). It sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from [His love].*

<sup>7</sup> See CCC §1033: *We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves. Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren. To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell."*

Obviously much opposed to St. Paul's teaching – Rom 6:15/9:22; Col 3:6; Eph 2:3,5,6; Rom 1:18f; 1Thess 2:16; Heb 3:9-11; Rom 2:5f/3:5/12:19; 1Thess 1:10/5:9; Heb 4:3

## b. New Theology of the Redemption

Traditional theology: Describes the Redemption as a work of love (obviously), but of a love which seeks foremost to appease the divine justice that has been offended by sin (see *Summa Theologica*, III<sup>a</sup> pars, q. 48, a. 2; Pius XII, *Haurietis Aquas*). As such, the notion of satisfaction of the divine justice is essential to this mystery, and thus the sacrificial death of Christ takes the primary place in the history of this mystery.

New theology: If there is no need to satisfy the divine justice (based on reasons detailed above), then the doctrine of Christ's satisfaction on the Cross appears scandalous:

*“faced with the most innocent and beloved of victims, the victim most capable of moving God in His compassion, He asks him for compensation of the most humiliating and painful kind! ...What harshness! What incomprehensible insensitivity! Let us say rather, gentlemen: what an abominable way to interpret the thoughts of God! Nothing justifies it in the least.”* (Henry Pinard de la Boullaye, “*Jésus rédempteur*”, *Conférences de Notre-Dame de Paris*)

From the perspective of the Paschal mystery, the Redemption “*is not meant to give something back to God, but to give God back to man*” (Mersch, *Théologie du Corps Mystique*)

The Redemption is no longer the satisfaction of divine justice as wrought by Christ, **rather it becomes the supreme revelation of the eternal Covenant which God has made with humanity**, and which has never been destroyed by sin:

*It is precisely beside the path of man's eternal election to the dignity of being an adopted child of God that there stands in history the cross of Christ, the only-begotten Son, who, as “light from light, true God from true God,” came to give the final witness to the wonderful covenant of God with humanity, of God with man—every human being.* (JP2, *Dives in Misericordia*, 7)

*The Redemption then reveals to us the depth of that love which does not recoil before the extraordinary sacrifice of the Son, in order to satisfy the fidelity of the Creator and Father towards human beings...* (ibid)

If the redemptive work of Christ is not meant to make satisfaction for the sins of man but only to reveal fully the love of the Father, the principal act of Redemption is no longer the death of Christ, but His Resurrection and Ascension, which represent the fullness of the revelation for which Christ became incarnate:

Since the revelation of God's merciful love is now the primary purpose of the Redemption, this love is revealed in its fullness<sup>8</sup> when Christ receives the reward for His passion and death (see Phil. 2:9)

This mystery remains the mystery of the Cross, but of the Cross “*seen in the fullness of its wonderful fruitfulness, i.e., insofar as it includes the Resurrection of Christ, His Ascension*

---

<sup>8</sup> “In fact, Christ... has revealed in His resurrection the fullness of the love that the Father has for Him, and in Him, for all people.” John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* (§8)

*into glory, and the showering of all the marvelous gifts upon man through Christ who has himself become 'pneuma', the life-giving Spirit." (Bouyer, Liturgical Piety)*

Moreover, it is especially by these mysteries Christ that reveals the fullness of His Covenant with humanity; it is found in the glorified Christ together with His body, the Church, which is without spot or wrinkle:

*"The mystery is Christ, but Christ including in himself his entire Body, the Church, making as it were Christ's plenitude. The mystery is, therefore, the recapitulation of humanity in itself and with God in the Body of His Son." (Bouyer, "Mysterion" in Supplément de la Vie Spirituelle 23)*

*"[Christ] has passed from the mortal life of this world to the glorious life of the heavens... has broken the boundaries of time... and whose saving work, which henceforth transcends earthly time, can rediscover a 'presence' or 'actuality' in the sacramental and liturgical mysteries." (Gaillard, La Liturgie du Mystère Pascal)*

c. This Concept as Expressed in Vatican II

Throughout all its documents, only twice is it stated that sin offends God, while sin is described 27 times as being harmful to man and to civil and ecclesiastical society.

Nowhere is it said that sin creates a debt in justice towards God, or that it is an obstacle to God's love for us. On the contrary, the Father has never ceased to look upon man with love, despite his becoming a sinner (Lumen Gentium §2, Gaudium et Spes §2, 19).

## EFFECTS OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE PASCHAL MYSTERY AS EXPRESSED IN THE LITURGICAL REFORM

The theology of the Paschal mystery has been called the soul of the liturgical reform. What is signified by the liturgy (ie: the act of Redemption) is henceforth considered from the perspective of the theology of the Paschal mystery, the reform of the rites "aims to...make the Paschal mystery of Christ live."<sup>9</sup>

### Lack of a Sense of Man's Unworthiness

**Traditionally:** A soul whose sins are forgiven is not thereby fully approved of by God – insofar as one has failed to satisfy the demands of justice by bearing the temporal punishment due to sin, one remains partially unjustified and thus unworthy to offer an acceptable sacrifice unaided. Likewise, the fact that man while living can still turn away from God necessitates that he "*work out his salvation in [filial] fear and trembling.*"

This unworthiness of the minister of the sacrifice means that God's acceptance of the sacrifice is considered as an unmerited grace, a grace asked for in reverential fear.

**In the New Theology:** Since God no longer regards sin as an injustice towards Himself and since He never breaks His side of the agreement with man, He is no longer asked to remit punishments due to sin, nor to appease His anger against the sinner.

Thus, all references to these punishments, or those that show fear of God, have been removed. The new missal does recognize man's need to be converted, but once done it supposes a state of total peace with

---

<sup>9</sup> *Liturgicae Instaurationes*, 1970

God: the idea being that once man has repented there is no obstacle to the offering either on God's side or on man's.

### **Examples:**

- The new missal grants the human participants in the liturgy a certain dignity and importance: *"We offer you, Father, this life-giving bread, this saving cup. We thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you"* (Eucharistic Prayer II).
- In the traditional missal, prayers of compunction for sin return again and again. If the new missal contains certain penitential elements, these are unusually brief and deficient.
- In view of the deficiency of the minister, the traditional missal places mediators between the celebrant and God – Jesus Christ as principal mediator, and the saints as subordinate mediators. The new missal gives the impression that the consequences of sin are no obstacle to the approval of the sacrifice, and thus it diminishes the need to turn to Christ or the saints for their intercession.
- The liturgy for the deceased fails to mention the punishment due for sin, drawing a veil completely over the sufferings of the souls in purgatory.

While the prayers of the traditional Requiem Mass clearly underline the propitiatory value of the sacrifice, asking that the dead may be released from their sins, the new missal emphasizes only the happiness of heaven and the resurrection.

### **Moving from Propitiation to Thanksgiving**

The Redemption is the full revelation of the Father's free and superabundant love for us – the response expressed in the celebration of the liturgy can only be one of thanksgiving and petition.

A new understanding of the Mass appears: it is less an application of the merits of Redemption and more a liturgy of the saved—the liturgy of a *"people your Son has gained for you"* (Eucharistic Prayer 3) who celebrate with thanksgiving a Redemption already accomplished in full<sup>10</sup>.

### **Examples:**

- The propitiatory dimension is never mentioned, while the Eucharistic aim appears frequently (see 1969 *Institutio Generalis* §2, 7, 48, 54, 55, 62, 259, 335, 339).
- Rather than thanksgiving being simply an aspect of an act which is essentially sacrificial, the new missal emphasizes the "eucharistic" aspect, making the Mass essentially become a memorial thanksgiving, the sacrifice simply being one of those things for which we are grateful.

This is notable simply in the new name of the Canon: 'Eucharistic Prayers'

*"Father, calling to mind the death your Son endured for our salvation, his glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven, and ready to greet him when he comes again, we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice"* (Eucharistic Prayer III).

- This is particularly notable in the liturgy for the deceased, in which their passage into eternal life is celebrated, it being taken for granted that they have already obtained it.

---

<sup>10</sup> This is how the 1969 *Institutio Generalis* introduces the Eucharistic Prayers: *"Nunc centrum et culmen totius celebrationis initium habet, ipsa nempe Prex eucharistica, prex scilicet gratiarum actionis et sanctificationis."* (§ 54)

## **Moving from a Sacrifice to a Meal**

Since there is no need for propitiation for sin, nor any need for the fruits of the Redemption to be applied to our souls, what is now the Essence of the Mass? Is it a sacrifice?

*The use of these sacrificial terms did not arise, as might be supposed, from an idea of the Cross as being in some way represented in the Mass. Far from it – historical evidence leads us rather to the supposition that the terminology of sacrifice came to be applied to the Cross by the Church because the Cross was felt to be at the heart of the sacrifice which is offered by the Church in the Eucharistic celebration...*  
(Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety*)

“*Sacrificium*” = *sacrum facere*

Sanctity consists in union with God, specifically union of the free will – traditionally this is expressed by the offering of sacrifice, immolating a victim in the place of myself as an expression of my adoration/subjection to God, thanksgiving for His benefits, sorrow and reparation for sin

There is no longer a sense of man’s unworthiness, of his debt owed to God, it is as though man has already won the crown of glory; man now has the honor of being made a member of God’s family, as though this privilege could never be forfeited, he is worthy to stand in God’s presence and sit at His table

What makes us holy? It is God’s condescension in giving us so many great gifts, without a thought for our cooperation

We commemorate the gifts of God given gratuitously and perpetually, more than strive to make ourselves conformable to those gifts

The Redemption is now only a revelation of God’s love

Man is raised to friendship with God, philosophical definition of friendship is a mutual love (of benevolence), expressed by the mutual sharing of goods

Thus when God invites us to share in His own table, when we are able to receive the gifts of God and to share with Him the gifts “made by human hands”, that is the highest expression of mutual love

*[The sacrifice of the New Testament] is now no more confined to any special rite, but is the whole of the Christian life inasmuch as it is a life in the ‘agape’, the divine Love. This is, of course, to say that the meal which expresses and, as it were, incorporates that ‘agape’, is itself and in all its details sacrificial in the highest sense. (Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety*)*

### **Examples:**

- In reference to communion, 1969 *Institutio Generalis* actually says: “*The celebration of the Eucharist is a paschal meal...*” (§56)
- “*The meaning of Communion is signified as clearly as possible when it is given under both species. In this form the meal-aspect of the Eucharist is more fully manifested*” (ibid, §240)