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Christos Aneste!

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Distinctly Catholic

Christ is Risen. The Crucified Lives. Here is the essential proclamation of our Christian faith. Everything we have learned, everything we believe, rises or falls with this claim. Our faith in the resurrection is decisive for the Christian, absolutely decisive.

In his meditations on the Paschal Mystery, the great Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote of the challenge posed by the desire to spiritualize the experience of faith, especially when the fact of death seems to require just such a spiritualization. This philosophic approach to death is most pronounced in the Eastern religions, for whom matter itself is a thing to be got past. But, in the West, Stoicism took a similar approach, counseling the wise to transcend their passions and attain a disinterestedness that would banish the fear of death. This tendency also finds expression in the Socratic-Platonic form which, as Balthasar writes,

persuades us that we do not need to fear death since only an element that is alien to us in the end, the mortal body, falls away from us, and we, freed from it, can finally be unhindered as immortal souls. German Enlightenment and German Idealism are full of this teaching: In death, the butterfly flies off, leaving behind the chrysalis.

Balthasar considers these tendencies ?the most persistent enemy, not only of Christianity, but of true humanity in general, since, when applied seriously, it paralyzes any true commitment in earthly-transient life, in work as well as in love.?

How to escape this temptation? Only the Paschal Mystery provides an answer. Balthasar writes:

But what is the mission [of Jesus Christ]? It is that by his loving obedience to the very end, he should reconcile to God the world estranged from God, which is possible only by taking all this estrangement upon himself and bearing it ? as an eclipse of God ? through to the end, and even beyond its end, since his loving obedience to the Father is deeper and more final than any rebellion of sin can ever be. One may call the sin of the world its lie and illusion, but the world itself, the people to whom Jesus? mission is

addressed, are anything but maya and illusion. And his mission runs counter to the philosophical teaching on dying: it is not about detaching oneself from the transitory things in order to flee into some real or supposed eternity, but, conversely, about sowing the seed of eternity into the field of the world and letting the Kingdom of God spring up in this field.

Last Friday, we all venerated the Cross, kissing the wood. Those who think our Catholic penchant for depictions of the crucifixion is a bit morbid should ponder those words of Balthasar's. The simple faith of the people, who cling to their crucifixes, is seen to be far truer than the disinterestedness of the philosophers. Jesus did not leave behind a chrysalis. The Savior of the World is not a butterfly.

Balthasar continues his insistence on avoiding any spiritualization of the Paschal Mystery when he turns his attention to the resurrection. He writes:

The words, gestures and deeds [of the risen Christ] are of a gentleness that has nothing abstract or other-worldly about it; rather, it is quite intimate and confidence-inspiring, although one sense the transition through death into a life that includes the final human experience. What is more gentle, more intimate than the words exchanged with Mary of Magdala at the open tomb; what is more delightful than the conversation on the way to Emmaus, culminating in the sharing of bread; what is so intimate and, at the same time, so restrained as the morning meal on the lake shore?...Yet the most wonderful is probably this: that Jesus, appearing to the disciples who have denied him and shamefully fled, does not grant them his own forgiveness; rather, passing over this, he puts into their hands as a fruit of his Cross the permission for the Church to forgive: 'Receive the Holy Spirit; if you forgive the sins of any?.' In the risen Christ, the God in him appears as his most divine, and the man in him as his most human, yet both inseparably one.

The passage from death to life is astounding and, oddly, prosaic, at the same time. So it is that the two sacraments that accompany the Christian life time and again, confession and the eucharist, are both astounding and prosaic re-statements of this fundamental Paschal Mystery, the bringing of new life out of death. There is a rhythm to Christian witness and that rhythm is set by the events of the Triduum.

If there is, then, no possibility of retreating into other-worldly spirituality according to the rhythm of the Paschal Mystery, how do we prevent the opposite temptation, one so obvious in the Church as well, the temptation for a headlong rush into the world with the aim of proselytizing on behalf of our own particular agenda or ideology? How do we stay true to the Christian mission and not risk becoming slaves to our egos, no matter how finely we dress them up in religious garb? The answer is simple: We follow the rhythm, which is, after all, a rhythm of martyrdom, first that of Jesus whose mission brought him to the Cross, and second, that of his followers, not just the martyrdom of actual death but the martyrdom of discipleship, of dying to self and living for the Lord. In the New Testament these martyrdoms have nothing dramatic about them for the very reason that they are the simple logical consequence of the admittedly dramatic premise that Christian mission ultimately is given by the one who died and was raised for us. Thus we are as a matter of principle deprived of any rights from the outset: None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord (Rom 14:7f.). Any liberation theology, of the right or the left, that aspires to be a Christian theology must be rooted in this self-surrender of martyrdom. Any Christian program or agenda must remember this rhythm of Good Friday and Easter. The Church must always be renewed at the foot of the Cross, in all its suffering and pain, if that same Cross is to become the tree of life, the non-spiritualized, busy in the transitory world, life to which we are called.

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Lastly, just how alien the Christian vision is to the norms and standards of our modern, protean culture, is revealed in these words of Balthasar's:

How hard our dying within Jesus? death will be will not be determined by us; God can either relieve our death because of the hardness of the Son's death, or he can graciously let us share some of this hardness. He will catch us in his fatherly hands, even if together with Jesus we feel ourselves abandoned, even if we seem to sink into a bottomless abyss.

The words "graciously let us share some of this hardness" leap off the page. We do not seek hardness in early twenty-first century America. We seek fitness. We seek pleasure. We seek leisure time. Certainly, we do not embrace hardness, and, just so, we are reluctant to embrace the crosses in our lives. Yet, that is the rhythm of the Paschal Mystery. That is the way of the Cross. That is the way that leads to the Easter joy. There is no other way. It was the Devil who tempted Jesus to an easier way.

Jesus did not choose the easier way and, just so, we can, with Jesus, allow ourselves to be caught in the "fatherly hands" of God. But, only if we let go of our desire for ease, our quest for power, our urge to dominate, our relishing of our creature comforts, our indifference. Yes, we Christians are called to enter the world, but we enter as those who cling to the Cross and hope in the empty tomb. If we cannot spiritualize paradise into irrelevance, neither can we accept the earthiness of political or economic or cultural norms when they fail to reflect the Cross and the empty tomb. Otherwise, we may go into the world, but not as followers of the Crucified who lives. May the blessings of Him whom we crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, enter into our hearts and minds this Eastertide and may those blessings propel us into the world to sow the seeds of His Kingdom whatever the cost.

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