

A Commentary on the Gospel by St. Athanasius ¹

It will not be out of place to consider the ancient tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church, which was revealed by the Lord, proclaimed by the apostles, and guarded by the fathers. For upon this faith the Church is built, and if anyone were to lapse from it, that person would no longer be a Christian either in fact or in name.

We acknowledge the Trinity, holy and perfect, to consist of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this Trinity there is no intrusion of any alien element or of anything from outside, nor is the Trinity a blend of creative and created being. It is a wholly creative and energizing reality, self-consistent and undivided in its active power, for the father makes all things through the Word and in the Holy Spirit, and in this way the unity of the Holy Trinity is preserved. Accordingly in the Church, one God is preached, one God who is *above all things and through all things and in all things*. God is *above all things* as Father, for he is the principle and source; he is *through all things* through the Word; and he is *in all things* in the Holy Spirit.

Writing to the Corinthians about spiritual matters, Paul traces all reality back to the one God, the Father, saying: *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone.*

Even the gifts that the Spirit dispenses to individuals are given by the Father through the Word. For all that belongs to the Father belongs also to the Son, and so the graces given by the Son in the Spirit are true gifts of the Father. Similarly, when the Spirit dwells in us, the Word who bestows the Spirit is in us too, and the Father is present in the Word. This is the meaning of the text: *My Father and I will come to him and make our home with him*. For where the light is, there also is the radiance; and where the radiance is, there too are its power and resplendent grace.

This is also Paul's teaching in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all*. For grace and the gift of the Trinity are given by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Just as grace is given from the Father through the Son, so there could be no communication of the gift to us except in the Holy Spirit. But when we share in the Spirit, we possess the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit himself.

¹A Word in Season – vol. III – Exordium Books – 1983 – pg 224

On the Ambiguity of Death, by Karl Rahner, S.J.¹

The death that a person must undergo is ambiguous in a terrifying way. First of all, it is a participation in the death of Adam, and as such the revelation of sin and despair. And secondly, our death is also the participation in the death of Christ, and hence a participation in the advent of redemption from sin. In this sense, it is the incarnation of that faith that saves. Looked at from the outside, and this can be true even of the experience of one who is dying, both of these meanings seem to be the same. According to the way each person accepts and endures this ambiguous and puzzling fate, whether in despair or in faith and love - therefore does a person die either the death of the first sinner or the death of our Lord.

Our death is a culmination of the unrepeatable onceness of our personal human existence. The Epistle to the Hebrews applies this onceness to the death of Christ. Also with regard to its onceness, our death cannot be practiced ahead of time. We cannot study death perfectly before experiencing it. A person goes through it once either rightly or wrongly without the chance of correcting himself. This is so true that what we call heaven or hell is the result with absolute finality.

Despite this onceness, there is such a thing as a real preparation for death. St. Paul says that we die our whole life through. It remains true that death is just the way life was, and that a person only concretizes in this death the full meaning of 'detachment.' Therefore, in a very true sense death is actually anticipated in every moral act in which the higher and more distant goal is preferred to the lower, nearer, and more pleasant one.

Through the intrusion of death from without, and through the rupture of existence which essentially characterizes death, indifference is, as it were, forced on us whether we like it or not. Now absolutely everything is taken away from us. Now, even if we are in a good hospital and we have all the necessary drugs, we are suspended with Christ between heaven and earth and are excluded from human society. But death is especially the end from within myself: It is my final act.

We can also consider the weakness involved in death in an Adamitic or a Christian way. Death is either that impotency which is the ultimate result of the sin that took hold of Adam, or it is a participation in the self-divestment of Christ that was never so great and so extensive as it was in his death on the cross.

We might think of the loneliness of death. A dying individual is pitilessly lonely. No one can do anything for him. We can share our life with others, but not our death! But the loneliness of death is especially a being-alone before the hidden, living God: It is either the blessed abandonment of Christ, or the unholy expulsion into the outer darkness that is eternally impregnated with hate.

The onceness of death implies also its finality. In death, I am really at the end of the rope. There just is no life after death in the sense that my human existence then "keeps right on going" more or less the way it is now. Death means a radical and questionless existence with or against God. Therefore, the finality of death is the last decision. To this extent, one's death is also one's judgement.

¹ Practicing the Faith, Cp.63. Crossroads 1983. p.295

From a Sermon by St. Anthony of Padua ¹

The one who is filled with the Holy Spirit speaks in different languages. These different languages are different ways of witnessing to Christ, such as humility, poverty, patience and obedience. We speak in these languages when we reveal in ourselves these virtues to others. Actions speak louder than words; let your words teach and your actions speak. We are full of words but empty of actions, and therefore are cursed by the Lord, since he himself cursed the fig tree when he found no fruit but only leaves. Gregory says: “A law is laid upon the preacher to practice what he preaches.” It is useless for a person to flaunt their knowledge of the law if they undermine its teaching by their actions.

But the apostles *spoke as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech*. Happy the one whose words issue from the Holy Spirit and not from himself! For some speak as their own character dictates, but steal the words of others and present them as their own and claim the credit for them. The Lord refers to such people and others like them in Jeremiah: *So, then, I have a quarrel with the prophets that steal my words from each other. I have a quarrel with the prophets, says the Lord, who have only to move their tongues to utter oracles. I have a quarrel with the prophets who make prophecies out of lying dreams, who recount them and lead my people astray with their lies and their pretensions. I certainly never sent them or commissioned them, and they serve no good purpose for this people, says the Lord.*

We should speak, then, as the Holy Spirit gives us the gift of speech. Our humble and sincere request to the spirit for ourselves should be that we may bring the day of Pentecost to fulfillment, insofar as He infuses us with his grace, by using our bodily senses in a perfect manner and by keeping the commandments. Likewise we shall request that we may be filled with a keen sense of sorrow and with fiery tongues for confessing the faith, so that our deserved reward may be to stand in the blazing splendor of the saints and to look upon the triune God.

¹ The Liturgy of the Hours – vol. III – Catholic Book Publishing Co – New York – 1975 – pg 1470

From St. Bernard's Lament for the Death of Gerard, his Brother.¹

How much better for me, O Gerard, if I had lost my life rather than your company, since through your tireless inspiration, your unfailing help and under your provident scrutiny I persevered with my studies of things divine. Why, I ask, have we loved, why have we lost each other? O cruel circumstance! But pity pertains to my lot only, not to his.

And the reason, dear brother, is that though you have lost your loved ones, you have found others more lovable still. As for me, already so miserable, what consolation remains to me, and you, my only comfort, gone? Our bodily companionship was equally enjoyable to both, because our dispositions were so alike; but only I am wounded by the parting. All that was pleasant we rejoiced to share; now sadness and mourning are mine alone: anger has swept over me, rage is fastened on me. Both of us were so happy in each other's company, sharing the same experiences, talking together about them; now my share of these delights has ceased and you have passed on, you have traded them for an immense reward.

What harvest of joys, what a profusion of blessings is yours. In place of my insignificant person you have the abiding presence of Christ, and mingling with the angelic choirs you feel our absence no loss. You have no cause to complain that we have been cut off from you, favored as you are by the constant presence of the Lord of Majesty and of his heavenly friends. But what do I have in your stead? How I long to know what you now think about me, once so uniquely yours, as I sink beneath the weight of cares and afflictions, deprived of the support you lent to my feebleness! Perhaps you still give thought to our miseries, now that you have plunged into the abyss of light, become engulfed in that sea of endless happiness. It is possible that though you once knew us according to the flesh, you now no longer know us and because you have entered into the power of the Lord you will be mindful of his righteousness alone, forgetful of ours. Furthermore, "he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him," his whole being somehow changed into a movement of divine love. He no longer has the power to experience or relish anything but God, and what God himself experiences and relishes, because he is filled with God. But God is love, and the deeper one's union with God, the more full one is of love. And though God cannot endure pain, he is not without compassion for those who do; it is his nature to show mercy and pardon. Therefore you too must of necessity be merciful, clasped as you are to him who is Mercy; and though you no longer feel the need of mercy, though you no longer suffer, you can still be compassionate. Your love has not diminished but only changed; when you were clothed with God you did not divest yourself of concern for us, for God is certainly concerned about us. All that smacks of weakness you have cast away, but not what pertains to love. And since love never comes to an end, you will not forget me for ever.

It seems to me that I can almost hear my brother saying: "Can a woman forget the son of her womb? And if she should forget, yet I will not forget you." This is how it must be.

¹On The Song Of Songs II Sermon 26.III. tr. Kilian Walsh. Cistercian Publications 1976. p.62-4.

SACRIFICE AND TURNING TOWARD GOD, from Pathways in Scripture by Dom Damasus Winzen¹

In the other sacrifices [in the Book of Leviticus] the killing is left to the offerer, who has presented the animal at the tabernacle and who, by laying, or better, planting his hands on its head, has made it his "support" to do atonement for him. The purpose of the sacrificial slaughtering is not the death of the animal but the freeing of its blood. This symbolizes the fundamental act of renouncing one's own self and turning toward God with which the human approach to God has to begin in this state of fallen nature. For this reason, the offerer himself has to do the killing. The function of the priest begins only with taking the blood and presenting it at the altar. "The blood is the life of the flesh"(17:11). Freed from the fetters of self-will through death, it has been given by God upon the altar to make at-one-ment for souls.

"Atonement" has to be taken in its original meaning of restoring union with God. The various ways in which the priest brings the blood into contact with the altar express various ways of nearness to God. At the usual burnt offering it is dashed around about against the altar to symbolize the wholehearted effort or resolution which accompanies the burnt offering. At the sin offering the blood is smeared on the horns of the altar--on the horns of the altar of burnt offerings for the laypeople, on the horns of the golden altar in the holy place for the priests. Because the horns of the altar stand for the strength of God and his power to raise up what was fallen, the smearing of blood on the horns means the faithful, confident, abiding adherence to God. Greatest nearness to God is achieved through the highest of sin offerings, on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest brings the blood for the priests as well as for the laymen into the holy of holies to sprinkle it (in Hebrew "to cause to leap up") on the mercy seat, the most sublime symbol of the grace-giving divine presence. This rite foreshadows the final, wholly spiritual union with God that is being brought about by Christ, who, as our high priest, entered with his own blood into the holy of holies (Heb 9:11-12).

As the shedding of the blood in the levitical sacrifices symbolizes the freeing of the inner life of the offerer from selfishness and his union with God, so also does the use of the flesh at the sacrifices indicate transformation rather than destruction. The term which Leviticus uses for the sacrificial burning of the carcass is not the ordinary secular word for destructive burning (*saraph*), but has the meaning of "causing to go up in sweet smoke" (*hiqtir*). The fire on the altar of burnt offerings was a sacred fire. It came down from heaven in the first instance of Aaron's sacrifice, and it was never allowed to go out. It represents the holy will of God who transforms our entire life, makes it ascend to the level of the spirit where it pleases God.

¹PATHWAYS IN SCRIPTURE, Dom Damasus Winzen (Word of Life, Ann Arbor MI 1976) pp. 57-58.

From the Life of St. Lutgarde by Thomas Merton ¹

Born in 1182, Lutgarde reached maturity at the turn of the 13th century. She belongs to the age of St. Francis and St. Dominic, St Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure. It was a great age. With the growth of the new social order came the development of a new spirit in Christian devotion and Christian living. Collective, liturgical prayer ceased to have the influence it had exercised in the ages of St. Augustine and St. Benedict. Spirituality became more imaginative, affective, individual. The sacred humanity of Jesus became a reality to which the saints of the 13th century were passionately devoted. It was fitting that the Cistercians should play an important part in this new growth, for Bernard of Clairvaux had done more than any other individual to set the movement going.

Lutgarde was born of a bourgeois father who, like the father of St. Francis of Assisi, cherished worldly ambitions for his children. However her mother favored a convent life. Even so, a young man fell in love with her while she was residing at the Benedictine convent of St. Catherine. Pleased and a little flattered by these attentions, she was content to have them continue. But Christ Himself intervened, and made one of these meetings the occasion of His first mystical grace to His daughter.

One day, while the simple girl was sitting behind the grille in the parlor listening to her admirer, Christ in His humanity suddenly appeared. He revealed the spear-wound in His side, and said to her: "Seek no more the pleasure of this affection; behold here, what you should love, and how you should love. Here in this wound I promise you the most pure of delights."

Another time Jesus asked her: "What do you want?" "Lord," she told him, "I want your Heart." Jesus responded: "What do you mean: you want My Heart? I want *your* heart." To which Lutgarde replied: "Take it, dear Lord. But take it in such a way that your Heart's love may be so mingled with my own heart that I may possess my heart in you, and may ever it remain there secure in Your protection."

St Lutgarde is perhaps the first saint in whom this mystical "exchange of hearts" was effected. Since her time, the exchange has become more common in the lives of mystics devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. We read of it in the lives of St. Gertrude, St. Mechtilde (both Cistercians) and St. Margaret Mary.

After some years Lutgarde was elected Prioress of St Catherine convent. However due to the distraction of that position, she decided to enter the Cistercian Abbey near Liege. The period was marked by the Catharist heresy which laid claim to a higher and purer spirituality than that of the Church. They believed that the flesh, the body and all material creation were absolutely evil. The souls of humans were really fallen angels, imprisoned as punishment in human bodies and immersed in the filth of material creation.

¹ What are these Wounds? By Thomas Merton – Bruce Publishing Co – Milwaukee - 1950

Rescue from this state had been effected by the son of God. But Christ had never really taken flesh, since the flesh was filthy. Therefore He had not died or risen from the dead.

The Blessed Virgin appeared to Lutgarde with a face very sorrowful. She told Lutgarde that this was because “my Son is once again being crucified by heretics and bad Christians.” She then enjoined on Lutgarde a fast of seven years in reparation. Lutgarde then began the first of three seven year fasts on bread and the ordinary drink of the convent, which happened to be weak beer.

Her third seven-year fast brought her to the end of her life. In 1239 or 1240, Christ again appeared to her and warned her that His Church was exposed to attack by a powerful enemy. This attack would result in terrible harm to souls, unless someone undertook to suffer and win grace from God. Thus Lutgarde began her third and last fast. She was to die in its seventh year. But her death would be serene with the confidence of victory.

Mary, Mother of the Creator, a reading from a meditation by John Henry Newman.¹

This is the title which, of all others, we should have thought it impossible for any creature to possess. At first sight we might be tempted to say that it throws into confusion our primary ideals of the Creator and creature, the Eternal and the temporal, the Self-subsisting and the dependent; and yet on further consideration we shall see that we cannot refuse the title to Mary without denying the Divine Incarnation - that is, the great and fundamental truth of revelation, that God became man.

And this was seen from the first age of the church. Christians were accustomed from the first to call the Blessed Virgin "The Mother of God," because they saw that it was impossible to deny her that title without denying St. John's words, "The Word (that is, God the Son) "was made flesh". And in no long time it was found necessary to proclaim this truth by the voice of an Ecumenical Council of the Church. And since that time the title of Mary, as Mother of God, has become what is called a dogma, or article of faith, in the church.

But this leads us to a larger view of the subject. Is this title given to Mary more wonderful than the doctrine that God, without ceasing to be God, should become man? Is it more mysterious that Mary should be Mother of God, than that God should become man? Yet the latter, as I have said, is the elementary truth of revelation, witnessed by Prophets, Evangelists, and Apostles all through Scripture. And what can be more consoling and joyful than the wonderful promises which follow from this truth, that Mary is Mother of God? - the great wonder, namely that we become the brethren of our God; that, if we live well and die in the grace of God, we shall all of hereafter be taken up by our Incarnate God to that place where angels dwell; that our bodies shall be raised from the dust to be taken to Heaven; that we shall be really united soul and body, shall be plunged into the abyss of glory which surrounds the Almighty; that we shall be really united to God; that we shall be partakers of the Divine nature; that we shall see Him, and share His blessedness, according to the text, "Whosoever shall do the will of My Father that is in Heaven, the same is My brother, and sister, and Mother".

¹from *Meditations and Devotions*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1953, p. 38-40.