

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap
Lent 2017 - First Sermon

THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADS US INTO THE MYSTERY
OF THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST

1. “He will bear witness to me”

One thing impressed me while reading the initial prayer of the Mass of the First Sunday of Lent this year. We don't pray that God the Father give us the strength to accomplish one of the classic Lenten works: fasting, praying, doing charity; we ask rather to “grow in the knowledge of the mystery of Christ.” I believe that this is indeed the most important and most acceptable work in God's eyes, and it is to this end that my Lenten meditations would like to contribute.

Following the reflection begun in the Advent on the Holy Spirit who should permeate the whole life and proclamation of the Church (“Theology of the Third Article”!), in these Lenten meditations I intend to move from the third article to the second article of the creed. In other words, we will try to highlight how the Holy Spirit “leads us into all the truth” about Christ and his paschal mystery, that is, about the Savior's being and work. Concerning Christ's work we will try, in keeping with the liturgical season of Lent, to delve into the role the Holy Spirit plays in the death and resurrection of Christ and in our personal death and resurrection.

The second article of the creed, in its complete formulation, is as follows:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.

This central article of the creed reflects two different stages of faith. The phrase, “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,” reflects the earliest faith of the Church immediately after Easter. What comes next in the article of the creed, “born of the Father before all ages . . . ,” reflects a later, more evolved stage, subsequent to the Arian controversy and the Council of Nicea in 325. Let us dedicate the present meditation to the first part of the article, “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,” and see what the New Testament tells us about the Spirit as the author of the true knowledge of Christ.

St. Paul affirms that Jesus Christ was manifested as the “Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness” (Rom 1:4), that is, according to the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul reaches the point of declaring that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3), thanks to his inner revelation. He attributes to the Holy Spirit the “insight into the mystery of Christ” that was given to him and was also “revealed to his holy apostles and prophets” (Eph 3: 4-5). He says that, “strengthened with might through his Spirit,” believers will be able to “to

comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3: 16, 19).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself proclaims this work of the Paraclete in his regard. The Holy Spirit will take what is his and will declare it to the disciples; the Spirit will remind them of all that Jesus said; he will lead them into all the truth about Jesus’ relationship with Father and will bear witness to him (see Jn 16:7-15). From this point on, the precise criterion for recognizing if something is from the Spirit of God or from another spirit will be if one is moved to acknowledge that Jesus has come in the flesh (see 1 Jn 4:2-3).

Some people believe that the current emphasis on the Holy Spirit could overshadow the work of Christ almost as though that work was incomplete or imperfect. This is a complete misunderstanding. The Spirit never says, “I”; he never speaks in the first person; he always points to Christ; he does not claim to establish a work of his own but always refers himself to Christ and leads believers to him. Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life; the Spirit is the one who helps us understand all this!

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost results in a sudden illumination of the whole work and person of Christ. Peter concludes his discourse at Pentecost with a solemn declaration, which today could be called “*urbi et orbi*”: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord [*Kyrios*] and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). From that day on, the early community began to look at the life of Jesus, his death, and resurrection in a different way; everything seemed clear now, as if a veil had been removed from their eyes (see 2 Cor 3:16). Although they had lived side by side with him, without the Spirit they had not been able to penetrate the profundity of his mystery.

Today a rapprochement is occurring between Orthodox and Catholic theology on this topic of the relationship between Christ and the Spirit. At a conference in Bologna in 1980, the theologian John D. Zizioulas expressed reservations, on the one hand, about the ecclesiology of Vatican II because, according to him, “the Holy Spirit was brought into ecclesiology after the edifice of the Church was constructed entirely on a christological basis”; on the other hand, he recognized that Orthodox theology also needed to rethink the relationship between christology and pneumatology to avoid constructing an ecclesiology based only on pneumatology.¹ In other words we Latins are urged to deepen our understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church (which is what happened after the Second Vatican Council) while our Orthodox brethren are urged to deepen their understanding of the role of Christ and, consequently, of the presence of the Church in history.

2. Objective and Subjective Knowledge of Christ

Let us turn, then, to the role of the Holy Spirit with respect to the knowledge of Christ. In the New Testament, two kinds of knowledge of Christ are already outlined, or two areas in which the Spirit is at work. There is an objective knowledge of Christ—of his being, his mystery, and his

¹ See John D. Zizioulas, “Cristologia, pneumatologia e istituzioni ecclesiastiche: un punto di vista ortodosso,” in *Cristianesimo nella storia*, 2 (1981): pp. 111-127.

person—and there is a knowledge that is more subjective, practical, and interior that aims at knowing what Jesus “does for me” rather than at what he “is in himself.”

In Paul what predominates is an interest in understanding what Christ has done for us, in what was accomplished by Christ, and in particular his paschal mystery; in John what predominates instead is an interest in understanding who Christ is in himself: the eternal Logos who was with God and came in the flesh, the one who says, “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30). But it is only from subsequent developments that these two tendencies become evident. I note them briefly because this will help us understand the gift the Holy Spirit is giving to the church today on this matter.

In the patristic age, the Holy Spirit appears above all as the guarantor of the apostolic tradition concerning Jesus to counter new doctrines introduced by the Gnostics. St. Irenaeus affirms that the Spirit is the gift God entrusted to the Church; those who separate themselves with their false doctrine from the truth proclaimed by the Church are not partakers of him.² Tertullian argues the apostolic churches cannot have erred in their preaching of the truth. To think otherwise would signify that the Holy Spirit, “the Steward of God, the vicar of Christ,” who was sent by Christ and asked by the Father to be the teacher of truth, would have “neglected his office.”³

During the time of the great dogmatic controversies, the Holy Spirit is seen as the custodian of christological orthodoxy. In the councils, the Church has the firm certainty of being “inspired” by the Spirit in formulating the truth about the two natures of Christ, the unity of his person, and the completeness of his humanity. The emphasis is thus clearly on the objective, dogmatic, and ecclesial knowledge of Christ.

This tendency remains predominant in theology up until the Reformation. With one difference, however. The dogmas, at the time of their formulation, were vital questions and the result of lively participation by the whole Church, but once sanctioned and handed down, they tended to lose their incisiveness and become formal. “Two natures in one person” became a ready-made formula rather than the arrival point of a long and difficult process. During all this time there were certainly wonderful experiences of the intimate, personal knowledge of Christ that was full of fervent devotion to him like that of St. Bernard or Francis of Assisi. But these experiences did not have much influence on theology. Such experiences are still mentioned today in the history of spirituality but not in the history of theology.

The Protestant reformers reversed the situation and said, “To know Christ is to know his benefits and not . . . to reflect upon his natures and the modes of his Incarnation.”⁴ The Christ “for me” jumps to first place. A subjective, intimate knowledge is placed in contrast to objective, dogmatic knowledge; an “inner witness” from the Holy Spirit about Jesus in the heart of every believer is placed in contrast to the external testimony of the Church about Jesus. When this theological innovation also tended in official Protestantism to be transformed later into a “dead

² St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 3, 24, 1-2, eds. Alexander Roberts et al. (South Bend, IN: Ex Fontibus, 2012), p. 356.

³ Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 28, 1 (Pickerington, OH: Beloved Publishing, 2015), p. 35; see also *CC* 1, p. 209.

⁴ Philip Melancthon, *The Loci communes* [1521], trans. Charles Hill (Boston: Meador, 1944), p. 69; see also *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. Henricus Ernestus Bindseil (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1854), p. 85.

orthodoxy,” periodically movements, like Pietism in Lutheran circles and Methodism in Anglican circles, sprang up to bring it back to life. The apex of the knowledge of Christ coincides in these movements with the moment in which believers, moved by the Holy Spirit, become aware that Jesus has died “for them,” for each one of them in particular, and they recognize him as their personal Savior:

Then with my heart I first believed,
believed with faith divine,
power with the Holy Ghost received
to call the Savior *mine*.
I felt my Lord’s atoning blood
close to my soul applied.⁵

Let us conclude this brief look at history by noting a third stage in the way of conceiving of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the knowledge of Christ, one that has characterized the centuries of the Enlightenment of which we are the direct heirs. An objective, detached knowledge is now back in vogue, but it is no longer in the ontological category, as it was in the ancient era, but in the historical category. In other words, the interest is not in knowing who Jesus Christ *is in himself* (his pre-existence, his natures, his person) but *who he was in history*. It is the age of research surrounding the so-called “historical Jesus”!

In this stage the Holy Spirit no longer plays a role in the knowledge of Christ; he is entirely absent from it. The “inner witness” of the Holy Spirit now becomes identified with reason and the human spirit. The “external testimony” is the main thing, but this no longer means the apostolic testimony of the Church but only that of history, ascertained through various critical methods. The common presupposition of this effort was that to find the real Jesus, one needed to look outside the Church, releasing him “from the wrappings of ecclesiastical doctrine.”⁶

We know what the result of all this search for the historical Jesus has been: a failure, even though this does not mean it did not have many positive fruits. However, in this regard, there still persists an equivocation at bottom. Jesus Christ—and after him other people like St. Francis of Assisi—did not simply live in history but created a history and now live in the history they created, like a sound living in the wave that it produced. The fierce effort of rationalistic historians seems to be to separate Christ from the history he created in order to restore him to a common universal history, as though one could better perceive a sound in its authenticity by separating it from the wave that carries it. The history that Jesus initiated, or the wave he emitted, is the faith of the Church animated by the Holy Spirit, and it is only through that faith that one can know its source.

The legitimacy of normal historical research on Christ is not excluded by all this, but this research must be more aware of its limits and recognize that it does not exhaust all that can be known about him. Just as the noblest act of reason is to recognize that “there is an infinity of

⁵ Charles Wesley, hymn, “Glory to God and Praise and Love,” in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, #58.

⁶ See Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. William Montgomery (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), p. 397.

things that are beyond it,”⁷ so too the most honest act of the historian is to recognize that there exists something that cannot be reached by history alone.

3. The Sublime Knowledge of Christ

At the end of his classic work on the history of Christian exegesis, Henri de Lubac reached a rather pessimistic conclusion. He said that certain conditions were missing for us moderns to be able to revive a spiritual reading like that of the Fathers. What we lack is that enthusiastic faith, that sense of the fullness and unity of Scriptures they had. The desire to imitate their boldness in reading the Bible today would be almost risking profanation because we are lacking the spirit from which such readings arise.⁸ Nevertheless, he did not entirely close the door to hope; in another work he says that “If we aspire to find something of what was the spiritual interpretation of Scripture in the early centuries of the Church, . . . it is a spiritual movement that we must reproduce above all.”⁹

What de Lubac noted with regard to the spiritual understanding of Scripture can be applied all the more to the spiritual understanding of Christ. It is not enough to write new and more updated treatises on pneumatology. If we lack the underpinnings of a lived experience of the Spirit, analogous to that which accompanied the first elaboration of the theology of the Spirit in the fourth century, whatever is said will always remain external to the real issue. We would lack the necessary conditions to raise us to the level at which the Paraclete operates: the enthusiasm, the boldness, and that “sober intoxication of the spirit” about which almost all the great authors of that century spoke. We cannot present a Christ in the anointing of the Spirit if we do not live, in some way, in that same anointing.

The great innovation hoped for by Father de Lubac is now coming to pass. In the last century there arose a “spiritual movement,” which is continually growing, that has created the basis for a renewal of pneumatology that begins from an experience of the Spirit and of his charisms. I am speaking about the Pentecostal and Charismatic phenomenon. In its first fifty years, this movement—born in reaction to the liberal and rationalistic tendency in theology, like Pietism and Methodism mentioned above—has deliberately ignored theology and has in turn been ignored (and even ridiculed!) by academic theology.

However, when around the middle of the last century that movement penetrated traditional churches in possession of a vast theological apparatus and received a basic welcome from those respective hierarchies, theology could no longer ignore it. In a book called *Erfahrung und Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* [The Experience and Theology of the Holy Spirit], the most noted theologians of the day, Catholic and Protestant, examined the significance of the Pentecostal and charismatic phenomenon for the renewal of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Classics, 1995), p. 54; #267, Brunschvicg edition.

⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 63.

⁹ Henri de Lubac, *History and the Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), p. 450.

¹⁰ See Claus Heitmann and Heribert Mühlen, eds., *Erfahrung und Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* (Munich: Kösel, 1974); see also Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Part 2, trans. Geoffrey Chapman (New York: Crossroad

What interests us in all of this at this point only concerns the knowledge of Christ. What understanding of Christ is emerging in this new spiritual and theological atmosphere? The most significant fact is not the discovery of new perspectives and new methodologies following the latest trends in philosophy (structuralism, linguistic analysis, etc.) but the rediscovery of a basic biblical fact: Jesus Christ is Lord! The lordship of Christ is a new world that can be entered into only “by the action of the Holy Spirit.”

St. Paul speaks of a “superior” or even “sublime” knowledge of Christ that consists in knowing him and proclaiming him precisely as “Lord” (see Phil 3:8). This is the proclamation which, accompanied by faith in the resurrection of Christ, can make a person “saved”: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). This knowledge is made possible only by the Holy Spirit: “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). Anyone can of course just mouth those words without the Holy Spirit, but it would not then lead to the wonderful event we just referred to; it would not save a person.

What is so special about this affirmation that makes it so decisive? That can be explained from different points of view that are objective and subjective. The *objective power* of the statement, “Jesus is Lord,” is that it makes history, and in particular the paschal mystery, present. It is the conclusion derived from two events: Christ died for our sins; he was raised for our justification; *therefore*, he is Lord. “For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Rom 14:9). The events that led to it are contained in this conclusion and become present and operative in it. In this case words are truly “the house of Being.”¹¹ The proclamation “Jesus is Lord” is the seed from which the whole kerygma and subsequent Christian preaching developed.

From the *subjective* point of view, or what pertains to us, the power of this *proclamation* is the fact that it also entails a *decision*. Whoever proclaims it, is deciding the direction of his or her life. It is as if the person said, “You are *my* Lord; I submit myself to you, and I freely acknowledge you as my savior, my master, my teacher, the one who has all rights over me. I belong to you more than I do to myself because you have bought me at a price” (see 1 Cor 6:19-20).

The decision that is inherent in the proclamation of Jesus as “Lord” takes on a particular relevance today. Some people believe that it is possible, and even necessary, to lay aside the affirmation of the uniqueness of Christ in order to promote interfaith dialogue. However, to proclaim Jesus as “Lord” means precisely to proclaim his uniqueness. It is not without reason that the article has us proclaim, “I believe in *one* Lord Jesus Christ.” St. Paul writes,

Although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all

Publishing, 1983), pp. 151ff; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992); Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), p. 7ff.

¹¹ A famous formulation by the philosopher Martin Heidegger in his “Letter on Humanism,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 217.

things and for whom we exist, and *one Lord, Jesus Christ*, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor 8:5-6)

The apostle wrote these words at the time when the Christian faith, small and newly birthed, was facing a world dominated by powerful and prestigious cults and religions. The courage it takes today to believe that Jesus is “the only Lord” is nothing compared to the courage it took back then. But the “power of the Spirit” is not granted except to the one who proclaims Jesus as Lord in its powerful original meaning. It is a fact of experience. Only after a theologian or a preacher has decided to gamble everything on Jesus Christ, the “only Lord” —even at the cost of being “cast out of the synagogue”—only then does that person experience a new certainty and power in his or her life.

4. From the “Personage” of Jesus to the “Person” of Jesus

This luminous discovery of Jesus as Lord is, as I said, the innovation and the grace that God is granting in our time to his Church. I realized that when I questioned Tradition regarding all the other topics and words of Scripture, the testimony of the Fathers would come crowding into my mind. But when I tried to question it on this point, Tradition remained virtually silent. Already in the third century, the title “Lord” was no longer understood in its kerygmatic meaning. Outside of Jewish religious circles, the meaning of that word was not sufficient to express the uniqueness of Christ. Origen, for instance, considers “Lord” (*Kyrios*) to be a title used by someone who is still at the stage of fear; the relationship Lord–servant is inferior to the relationship Teacher–disciple.¹²

People of course continued to speak of “the Lord” Jesus, but it became a name for Christ like other names, and most often it was one of the components of Christ’s complete name: “Our *Lord* Jesus Christ.” But it is one thing to say, “Our Lord Jesus Christ,” and another to say, “Jesus Christ is our Lord!” One indication of this change is the way the text of Philippians 2:11 came to be translated in the Vulgate: “*Omnis lingua confiteatur quia Dominus noster Iesus Christus in gloria est Dei Patris,*” “every tongue must confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father.” It is one thing to say, “Our Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father” and quite another thing to say, “Jesus Christ *is* our Lord to the glory of God the Father.” In this second rendering, which is what current translations say, it is not just a name that is being uttered but a profession of faith that is being proclaimed.

Where in all this is the qualitative leap that the Holy Spirit leads us to make in our understanding of Christ? It is in the fact that the proclamation of Jesus as Lord is the door that leads us into the knowledge of the risen and living Christ! Christ is no longer a personage but a person; he is no longer a set of theses, dogmas (and corresponding heresies); he is no longer merely a figure to worship and remember, but a living person who is always present in the Spirit.

This spiritual and existential knowledge of Jesus as Lord does not lead to the neglect of objective, dogmatic, and ecclesial knowledge of Christ but instead revitalizes it. “By the Spirit of God,” St. Irenaeus says, revealed truth, “renewing its youth, as if it were some precious deposit

¹² See Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* 1, 201-203, trans. Ronald Heine, vol. 80, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), p. 74; *SCh* 120, p. 158.

in an excellent vessel, causes the vessel itself containing it to renew its youth also.”¹³ We will dedicate our next meditation, God willing, to one of these truths, the dogma that constitutes the second part of that article of the creed: “begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.”

I do not know a better practical resolution we can make at the end of these reflections than what we read at the beginning of the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* by Pope Francis:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her. (no. 3)

Translated from Italian by Marsha Daigle-Williamson

¹³ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 3, 24, 1, p. 355.

Father Raniero Cantalamessa
Lent 2017
Second Sermon

CHRIST, “TRUE GOD FROM TRUE GOD”

1. The Faith of Nicea

In this meditation we continue our reflection on the role of the Holy Spirit in knowing Christ. In this regard one cannot fail to mention an unexpected confirmation of this happening in the world today. For some time there has been a movement called “the Messianic Judaism,” whose members are Hebrew Christians. (“Christ” and “Christian” are the Greek translations for the Hebrew “Messiah” and “messianic”!) A low estimate points to about 150,000 members, divided into different groups and associations. They are based primarily in the United States, Israel, and in various European nations.

They are Jews who believe that Jesus, Yeshua, is the promised Messiah, the Savior, and the Son of God, but they do not want to renounce their Jewish identity and tradition. They do not officially adhere to any of the traditional Christian Churches because their intention is to connect with and revive the early church of the Jewish Christians, whose experience was very early on interrupted by well-known traumatic events.

The Catholic Church and other Churches have always abstained from promoting, or even mentioning, this movement for the obvious reason of their dialogue with official Judaism. I myself have never spoken of it. But the conviction is now growing that it is not fair, for either side, to continue to ignore them, or worse, to ostracize them. Recently a study by various theologians has been released in Germany on this phenomenon.¹⁴

I am mentioning it in this setting for the specific reason that it is relevant to topic of this meditation. In response to a survey about the factors and circumstances that were at the origin of their faith in Jesus, more than 60 percent of those involved answered, “the interior action of the Holy Spirit”; the second factor was their reading of the Bible, and the third was personal contact with other people.¹⁵ This is a confirmation from life experience that the Holy Spirit is the one who gives the true, intimate knowledge of Christ.

Let us return now to our main topic. Soon after Christianity appeared in the surrounding Greco-Roman world, the title “Lord,” *Kyrios*, was no longer enough. The pagan world knew many various “lords,” the Roman emperor specifically being the primary one among them. It was necessary to find another way to guarantee full faith in Christ and his worship as God. The Arian crisis provided that opportunity.

¹⁴ Ulrich Laepple, ed., *Messianische Juden: Eine Provokation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

This leads us to the second part of the article on Jesus that was added to the symbol of faith at the Council of Nicea in 325:

Born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with [*homoousios*] with the Father.

The bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, the undisputed champion of the Nicene faith, was very certain that neither he nor the Church of his time were the ones to discover the divinity of Christ. However, his whole work will consist in demonstrating that this had always been the faith of the Church. What was new was not the truth but its opposing heresy. His conviction in this regard finds an indisputable historical confirmation in a letter that Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia, wrote to the emperor Trajan around 111 AD. The only certain information he says he knows about the Christians is that “they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses . . . in honor of Christ as if to a god (*“carmenque Christo quasi Deo dicere”*).”¹⁶

Faith in the divinity of Christ already existed, so it is therefore only by completely ignoring history that anyone could say that the divinity of Christ is a dogma deliberately imposed on the Council of Nicea by the emperor Constantine. The contribution of the Fathers at Nicea, and in particular Athanasius, was, more than anything, to remove the obstacles that had impeded a full recognition of the divinity of Christ without reservation up to that point in the theological debates.

One such obstacle was the Greek habit of defining the divine essence with the word *agennetos*, “unoriginate” or “unbegotten.” How does one proclaim that the Word is true God from the moment that he is the Son, that is, from the moment that he is generated by the Father? It was easy for Arius to set up the equivalence between “generated” and “made” that is, to go from *gennetos* to *genetos*, and to conclude with his famous statement that exploded the issue: “There was a time when he was not!” (*en ote ouk en*). This was the equivalent of making Christ a creature even if he was “not like other creatures.” Athanasius resolved the controversy with a fundamental observation: “‘Unoriginated’ [*agneneto*] is a word of the Greeks, who know not the Son.”¹⁷ He vigorously defended Nicea’s expression “begotten, not made” (*genitus non factus*).

Another cultural obstacle to the full recognition of Christ’s divinity, on which Arius was able to base his thesis, was the doctrine of an intermediary divine being, the *deuteros theos*, put in charge of the creation of the world. From Plato onward, that “secondary god” had become a common assumption in many religious systems and philosophies in antiquity. The temptation to treat the Son “through whom all things were made” as this intermediate entity was creeping into Christian speculation (the apologists, Origen), even if it was extraneous to the internal life of the Church. It

¹⁶ Pliny the Younger, “Letter to Trajan about the Christians,” *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, 10, 96, trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin, 1963), p. 294. See also *Enchiridion fontium historiae ecclesiasticae antiquae*, ed. Conradus Kirch, 9th ed. (Barcelona: Herder, 1965), p. 23.

¹⁷ Athanasius, “Defense of the Nicene Definition” (*De decretis Nicenae synodi*), 7, 31, in *St. Athanasius: Select Work and Letters*, series 2, vol. 4, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1882), p. 384.

resulted in a tripartite order of being: at the top, the ungenerated Father; after him, the Son (and later also the Holy Spirit); and in third place, creatures.

The definition of “begotten, not made” and of the *homoousios* removed this obstacle and led to a Christian cathartic cleansing of the metaphysical universe of the Greeks. With that definition, only one line of demarcation was drawn through the vertical axis of being. There were only two modes of being now: that of Creator and that of creatures, and the Son was placed in the first category, not the second.

If we were to summarize the perennial significance of Nicea’s definition in one statement, we could formulate it this way: in every age and culture, Christ must be proclaimed as “God” not in some derivative or secondary sense but in the strongest sense that the word “God” has in that culture.

It is important to understand what motivated Athanasius and other orthodox theologians in their battle, that is, why their conviction was so absolute. It did not come from speculation but from life, more specifically, from reflection on the experience that the Church, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit, has of salvation in Christ Jesus.

The soteriological question was not born out of the Arian controversy; it was present in all the great christological controversies of antiquity ranging from the Gnostic controversy to the Monothelite controversy. In its classical formulation, it says, “That which He has not assumed He has not saved” (*Quod non est assumptum non est sanatum*).¹⁸ In Athanasius’ use of the formula, it could be understood this way: “What is not assumed *by God* is not saved,” and all it force lies in that short addition of “by God.” Salvation requires that human beings are not assumed by some kind of intermediary but by God himself. “If the Son were a creature,” writes Athanasius, “man had remained mortal as before, not being joined to God”¹⁹ and “man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God.”²⁰

We need, however, to make an important clarification here. The divinity of Christ is not a practical “postulate” as is true, according to Immanuel Kant, for the very existence of God.²¹ It is not a *postulate* but the explanation of a true fact. It would be a postulate—and thus a human theological deduction—if it began from a certain *idea* of salvation, and the divinity of Christ was deduced from it as the only possible means for bringing about such a salvation. Instead, it is the explanation of a fact if it starts from an *experience* of salvation, as Athanasius does, and demonstrates how that experience could not exist if Christ were not God. In other words, the divinity of Christ is not based on salvation; instead, salvation is based on the divinity of Christ.

2. “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15)

¹⁸ See Gregory of Nazianzen, “Letter to Cledonius,” *Select Letters of Saint Gregory Nazianzen* (London: Aeterna Press, 2016), p. 5; see also PG 37, 181.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 2, 69, in *St. Athanasius: Selected Works and Letters*, p. 700.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, 70, p. 701.

²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Classical Books International, 2010), chapters 3 and 6.

But it is time to return to our theme and try to see what we can learn today from the epic battle that orthodoxy endured in its time. The divinity of Christ is the cornerstone that holds up the two principal mysteries of Christian faith: the Trinity and the Incarnation. They are like two doors that open and close together. There are buildings or metal structures that are constructed in such a way that if a certain point is touched, or if one removes a certain stone, they collapse. The edifice of Christian faith is like that, and its cornerstone is the divinity of Christ. If this is removed, everything comes crashing down, and first of all the Trinity. If the Son is not God, who forms the Trinity? St. Athanasius had already clearly denounced any theory against Christ's divinity and in writing against the Arians and says,

If the Word is not with the Father from everlasting, the Triad is not everlasting, but a Monad was first, and afterwards by addition it became a Triad.²²

Saint Augustine said, "It is no great thing to believe that Christ died: even pagan and Jews and all bad people believe that. All of them are sure that he died. The faith of Christians is in Christ's resurrection."²³ The same thing that is said about the death and resurrection should be said about the humanity and divinity of Christ, whose death and resurrection are their respective manifestations. Everyone believes that Jesus was a man; what distinguishes believers from non-believers is the belief that he is God. The faith of Christians is in the divinity of Christ!

We need to ask ourselves a serious question. What place does Jesus Christ have in our society and in the faith of Christians? I believe we can speak in this regard about a presence-absence of Christ. On a certain level—that of entertainment and media in general—Jesus Christ is very present. In a never-ending series of stories, films, and books, writers manipulate the figure of Christ, at times under the pretext of supposedly new historical documents about him. This has become a trend, a literary genre. Some people take advantage of the broad appeal of Jesus' name and of what he represents for a large part of humanity to guarantee wide-ranging publicity at a low cost. I call all this literary parasitism.

From a certain point of view, we can say, then, that Jesus Christ is very present in our culture. But if we look at the sphere of faith, to which he belongs in the first place, we notice instead a disquieting absence, if not a direct rejection of his person. What do those who call themselves "believers" in Europe and elsewhere really believe? Most of the time they believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, a Creator; they believe in a "hereafter." However, this is deistic faith and not yet Christian faith. Various sociological studies highlight this fact even in countries and regions that have an ancient Christian tradition. Jesus Christ is absent in practical terms in this type of religiosity.

The dialogue between science and faith also leads, unintentionally, to putting Christ in parentheses. It does have God, the Creator, as its object, but the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth has no place in it whatsoever. The same thing happens in the dialogue with philosophy that likes to

²² Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 1, 18, p. 34; see also PG 26, 48.

²³ Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 99-120*, "Psalm 120," 6, vol. 3/19, trans. Mario Boulding, ed. Boniface Ramsey, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), p. 514; see CCL 40, p. 1791.

concern itself with metaphysical concepts rather than historical reality, not to mention interfaith dialogue in which peace and ecology are discussed, but not Jesus.

It takes just a simple glance at the New Testament to see how far we are here from the original meaning of the word “faith” in the New Testament. For Paul, the faith that justifies sinners and confers the Holy Spirit (see Gal 3:2)—in other words the faith that saves—is faith in Jesus Christ, in the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection.

During the earthly life of Jesus, the word “faith” already meant faith in him. When Jesus says, “your faith has saved you,” and when he reproves the apostles and calls them “you of little faith,” he is not referring to a generic faith in God that was a given for the Jews; he is speaking about faith in himself! This by itself refutes the thesis that says faith in Christ begins solely at Easter and before this there is only the “Jesus of history.” The Jesus of history already presupposes faith in himself, so if the disciples followed him it is precisely because they had a certain faith in him, even if it was quite imperfect before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

We therefore need to allow ourselves to directly confront the question Jesus asked his disciples one day after they had told him the opinions of people around him: “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15), and to confront the question that is even more personal, “Do you believe? Do you truly believe? Do you believe with your whole heart?” St. Paul says, “Man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved” (Rom 10:10). St. Augustine exclaims that faith “springs from the root of the heart.”²⁴

In the past, the second moment of this process—that is, the profession of a correct faith, i.e., orthodoxy—was at times so emphasized that it overshadowed the first moment, which is the most important one and which takes place in the hidden recesses of the heart. Almost all the treatises “On Faith” (*De fide*) written in ancient times focus on what to believe and not on the act of believing.

3. Who Is It That Overcomes the World?

We need to recreate the conditions for a faith in the divinity of Christ without reservation or hesitation. We need to reproduce the enthusiasm of faith from which the formula of faith was born. The Church body once produced a supreme effort through which it raised itself in faith above all human systems and all the opposition of reason. Afterward the fruit of this effort remained. The tide rose at one time to its greatest level and its trace was left behind on the rock. Its trace is the definition by Nicea that we proclaim in the creed. However, that rising tide needs to happen again; its trace is not enough. It is not enough to recite the Nicene Creed; we need to renew the enthusiastic surge of faith that existed at that time concerning the divinity of Christ and that has had no equal for centuries. We need to experience this again.

We need it above all for the sake of the new evangelization. St. John writes his First Letter, “Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 Jn 5:5). We

²⁴ St Augustine, *Tractates on John*, 26, 2, vol. 7, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philp Schaff (New York: Cosimo, 2007), p. 168; see also PL 35, p. 1607.

need to understand clearly what “overcoming the world” means. It does not mean having more success or dominating the political and cultural scene. That would instead lead to the opposite: not overcoming the world but becoming worldly. Unfortunately, there have been times in which people fell into this misunderstanding without realizing it. One can think of the theory of “the two swords” or of “the triple reign of the Supreme Pontiff,”²⁵ although we must always be careful not to judge the past with present-day criteria and assumptions. From the historical point of view, the opposite has happened instead, and Jesus declared it to his disciples ahead of time: “You will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice” (Jn 16:20).

So this excludes any triumphalism. It involves a victory of quite another kind: a victory over what the world also hates and does not accept in itself, which includes transience, debility, evil, death. This is in fact what the word “world” (*kosmos*) means in its negative sense in the Gospel. This is its meaning when Jesus says, “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:20).

How did Jesus overcome the world? Certainly not by defeating his enemies with “ten legions of angels” but instead, as Paul says, by “bringing the hostility to an end” (Eph 2:16), that is to say, bringing to an end everything that separates a human being from God, a person from another person, a nation from another nation. In order that there would not be any doubt about the nature of this victory over the world, it was inaugurated by an altogether special victory, the victory of the cross.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). These are the words most often reproduced in ancient mosaics on the pages of the book that the Pantocrator is holding open in his hands, like the mosaic in the famous cathedral of Cefalu. The Evangelist John affirms about Jesus that “in him was life, and the life was the light of men” (Jn 1: 4). Light and life, *Phos* and *Zoe*: these two words have their central Greek letter (*omega*) in common, and they are often found written in a crisscross pattern—one horizontally and the other vertically—to form a powerful and very widespread monogram of Christ:



What does a human being want most if not precisely these two things: light and life? We know that a great modern author, Goethe, murmured as he was dying, “More light.”²⁶ He was perhaps referring to wanting more natural light in his room, but the statement has always been assigned a metaphysical and spiritual meaning, and rightly so. One of my friends, who returned to faith in Christ after having gone through all possible and imaginable religious experiences, recounted his

²⁵ The “two swords” or “two powers” theory was a medieval approach by Pope Gelasius on the relationship between the Church and the empire and the pope’s spiritual authority over kings and other rulers. “The triple reign” or the “triple crown” theory means, in some interpretations, that the pope is a universal pastor, a universal judge, and a temporal power.

²⁶ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Mehr licht!,” quoted in *The Medico-chirurgical Review and Journal of Medical Science*, 24 (1834): 501.

life in a book called *Mendicante di luce* [Beggar of Light]. The crucial moment came when, right in the middle of a deep meditation, he felt a saying of Christ reverberating in his mind without being able to silence it: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”²⁷ Along the lines of what the apostle Paul said to the Athenians at the Areopagus, we are called to say in all humility to the world today, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23).

“Give me a place to stand on,” exclaimed Archimedes, the inventor of the principle of the lever, “and I will lift the Earth.” The one who believes in Christ is someone who has found a place to stand on. “The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock” (Matt 7:25).

4. “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see!”

We cannot, however, end our reflection without also mentioning the call that it includes, not just in view of evangelization but also in view of our lives and personal testimonies. In Paul Claudel’s play, *The Humiliated Father*, set in Rome at the time of Blessed Pius IX, there is a very evocative scene. A young Jewish girl, who is very beautiful but blind, is walking in the garden of a Roman villa in the evening with the pope’s nephew, Orian, who is in love with her. Playing on the dual significance of light, that of nature and that of faith, she says to her Christian friend at a certain point, “fervently, in a low-pitched voice,”

“But you who see, what use have you made of the light? . . .
You who say you live, what have you done with your life?”²⁸

It is a question that we cannot allow to go unheeded: What are we Christians doing with our faith in Christ? Or even better, what am I doing with my faith in Christ? Jesus said to his disciples one day, “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see!” (Lk 10:23; see Matt 13:16). It is one of the assertions with which Jesus tries to help his disciples on several occasions to discover his real identity for themselves, not being able to reveal it directly because of their lack of readiness to receive it.

We know that the words of Jesus are words that “will not pass away” (Matt 24:35); they are living words addressed to whoever hears them with faith at all times and in all places throughout history. It is therefore to us that he says here and now, “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see!” If we have never seriously reflected on how fortunate we who believe in Christ are, perhaps this is the time to do so.

Why are Christians “blessed” if they have no more reason than others to rejoice in this world and in many regions of the earth are even continually exposed to death, precisely because of their faith in Christ? He gives us the answer himself: “Because you see! Because you understand the meaning of life and of death, because ‘yours is the kingdom of heaven’—not in the sense that it is ‘yours and no one else’s.’” (We know that the kingdom of heaven, in its eschatological dimension, extends well beyond the confines of the Church.) “It is ‘yours’ in the sense that you are already part of it, you are tasting its first fruits. You have me!”

²⁷ See Masterbee, *Mendicante di luce: Dal Tibet al Gange e oltre* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2006), pp. 223ff.

²⁸ See Paul Claudel, *The Humiliated Father*, Act 1, sc. 3, in *Three Plays* (Boston: Luce, 1945).

The most wonderful thing that one spouse can say to another, and vice versa, is “You have made me happy!” Jesus deserves that his spouse, the Church, says that to him from the bottom of her heart. I say it to him and invite you, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters, to do the same. And to say it this very day so as not to forget it.

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap
Lent 207
Third Sermon

THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADS US INTO THE MYSTERY
OF THE DEATH OF CHRIST

1. The Holy Spirit in the Paschal Mystery of Christ

In the two preceding meditations we tried to show how the Holy Spirit leads us into the “fullness of truth” about the person of Christ, making him known as “Lord” and as “true God from true God.” In the remaining meditations our attention will shift from the person of Christ to the work of Christ, from his being to his acting. We will try to show how the Holy Spirit illuminates the paschal mystery.

Scarcely had the program for these Lenten sermons been made public when I was asked this question in an interview by *L'Osservatore Romano*: “*How much time will you devote to current affairs in your meditations?*” I responded that if “current affairs” referred to contemporary events and situations, I was afraid there would be very little of that in the upcoming Lenten sermons. But, in my opinion, “current” does not just mean “what is going on now,” and it is not a synonym for “recent.” The most “current” things are eternal things, those things that touch people in the most intimate core of their being in every age and in every culture. There is the same kind of distinction between “urgent” and “important.” We are always being tempted to put the urgent ahead of the important and to put the “recent” ahead of the “eternal.” This tendency has been increasing especially because of the rapid pace of communication and the media’s constant need for more news.

What is more important or timely for the believer, and for every man and every woman, than to know if life has meaning or not, if death is the end of everything or, on the contrary, if death is the beginning of real life? The paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ is the only answer to such questions. The difference between this relevant issue and those of the news media is the same as between someone who spends time looking at a design left by a wave on the shore (which the next wave erases!) and someone who lifts his or her gaze to contemplate the sea in its immensity.

With this in mind, let us meditate on the paschal mystery of Christ, beginning with his death on the cross. The Letter to the Hebrews says that Christ “through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God” (Heb 9:14). The “eternal Spirit” is another way of saying the Holy Spirit, which is confirmed by an ancient variation of the text. This means that Jesus, as man, received from the Holy Spirit dwelling in him the impulse to offer himself in sacrifice to the Father as well as the strength that sustained him during his passion. The liturgy expresses this very conviction when, in the prayer that precedes communion, the priest says, “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, Who, by the will of the Father, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit (*cooperante Spiritu Sancto*), [You] have by Your death given life to the world. . . .”

The same dynamic that occurred in the sacrifice also occurred in prayer. One day Jesus “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth . . .’” (Lk 10:21). It was the Holy Spirit who made the prayer rise up in him, and it was the Holy Spirit who urged him to offer himself to the Father. The Holy Spirit, who is the eternal gift the Son makes of himself to the Father in eternity, is also the one who urged him to make a sacrificial gift of himself to the Father for our sake in time.

The connection between the Holy Spirit and the death of Jesus is highlighted primarily in the Gospel of John. “As yet the Spirit had not been given,” notes the Evangelist concerning the promise of living water, “because Jesus was not yet glorified” (Jn 7:39), that is—according to the meaning of “glorification” in John—Jesus had not yet been lifted on the cross. Jesus “yielded up his spirit” (Matt 27:50) on the cross, symbolized by the water and the blood; John in fact writes in his First Letter, “There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood” (1 Jn 5:8).

The Holy Spirit brings Jesus to the cross, and from the cross Jesus gives the Holy Spirit. At the moment of his birth and then publicly in his baptism, the Holy Spirit *is given* to Jesus; at the moment of his death, Jesus *gives* the Holy Spirit. Peter says to the crowd gathered on the day of Pentecost, “Having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear” (Acts 2:33). The Fathers of the Church loved to highlight this reciprocity. “The Lord received ointment [*myron*] on his head,” says St. Ignatius of Antioch, “to breath incorruptibility on the church.”²⁹

At this point we need to recall St. Augustine’s observation regarding the nature of the mysteries in Christ. According to him, there is a true celebration of a mystery, and not just of an anniversary, when “the commemoration of the event is so ordered that it is understood to be significant of something [for us] which is to be received with reverence as sacred.”³⁰ And this is what we would like to do in this meditation, guided by the Holy Spirit: to see what the death of Christ signifies for us, what it changed concerning our death.

2. One Died for All

The Church’s creed ends with the words, “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” It does not mention what will precede resurrection and eternal life, that is, death. Rightly so, because death is not the object of faith but of our experience. Death, however, touches all of us too closely to pass over it in silence.

In order to evaluate the change brought by Christ concerning death, let us see what remedies human beings have looked to in order to deal with the problem of death, especially since they are the ones with which people still try to “console themselves” today. Death is the number one human problem. St. Augustine anticipated contemporary philosophy’s reflection on death:

²⁹ St. Ignatius of Antioch, “Letter to the Ephesians,” 17, in *Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna*, trans. and comm. Kenneth J. Howell (Zanesville, OH: CHResources, 2009), p. 87.

³⁰ St. Augustine, “Letter 55,” 1, 2, *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine*, series 1, vol. 1, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo, 2007), p. 303; see CSEL 34, 1, p. 170.

When a child is born there are so many speculations. Perhaps he will be handsome, perhaps ugly; perhaps he will be rich, perhaps poor; perhaps he will grow old, perhaps he will not. But no one says, “Perhaps he will die, perhaps he won’t.” Death is the only absolute certainty in life. When we know that someone has dropsy [this was an incurable disease at that time, but there are others today], we say, “Poor fellow, he is going to die; he is condemned to die; there is no cure.” Should we not say the same about anyone who is born? “Poor fellow, he has to die; there is no cure; he is condemned to die!” What difference does it make if he has a bit longer time or a bit shorter time to live? Death is the fatal disease we contract by being born.³¹

Perhaps better than thinking of our lives as “a mortal life,” we should think of it as “a living death,”³² a life of dying. This thought by Augustine has been taken up from a secular standpoint by Martin Heidegger who made death, in its own right, a subject for philosophy. Defining life and a human being as a “being-toward-death,” he sees death not as an event that brings life to an end but as the very substance of life, that is, as the way life unfolds. To live is to die. Every instant that we live is something that get consumed, that is subtracted from life and handed over to death.³³ “Living-for-death” means that death is not only the *end* but also the *purpose* of life. One is born to die and for nothing else. We come from nothingness and we return to nothingness. Nothingness is then the only option for a human being.

This is the most radical reversal of the Christian vision, which sees a human being instead as a “being-for-eternity.” Nevertheless, the affirmation that philosophy arrived at after its long reflection on human beings is neither scandalous nor absurd. Philosophy is simply doing its job; it shows what human destiny would be like if left to itself. It helps us understand the difference that faith in Christ makes.

More than philosophy, it is perhaps the poets who speak the simplest and truest words of wisdom about death. One of them, Giuseppe Ungaretti, speaking of the frame of mind of the soldiers in the trenches during World War I, described the situation of every human being confronting the mystery of death:

They stand
like leaves
on the trees
in autumn.³⁴

Scripture itself in the Old Testament does not have a clear answer on death. The Wisdom books speak about it but always from the standpoint of a question rather than of an answer. Job, the

³¹ See St. Augustine, “Sermon 47,” 3, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament*, trans. R. G. MacMullen, series 1, vol. 6, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), p. 413; see *Sermo Guelf.*, 12, 3 (Misc. Ag. I, p. 482ff).

³² St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 1, 6, 7, trans. John K Ryan (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), p. 46.

³³ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, #51, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2010), pp. 242ff.

³⁴ Giuseppe Ungaretti, “Soldiers” [“Soldati”], trans. Stuart Flynn, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, New Series no.18 (2001): 185.

Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, Wisdom—all these books dedicate considerable space to the theme of death. “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom,” one psalm says (Ps. 90:12). Why are we born? Why do we die? Where do we go when we die? These are all questions that are without any answers for the Old Testament sage except this one: God wills it to be so; there will be judgment for everyone.

The Bible refers to the disquieting opinions of unbelievers of that time: “Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a man comes to his end, and no one has been known to return from Hades. . . . We were born by mere chance, and hereafter we shall be as though we had never been” (Wis 2:1-2). Only in this book of Wisdom, which is the latest book of biblical wisdom literature, does death begin to be illuminated by the idea of some kind of recompense after death. The souls of the righteous, they thought, are in God’s hands, even if they did not know exactly what that meant (see Wis 3:1). It is true that in one of the psalms we read, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Ps 116:15). But we cannot place too much weight on this verse that has been cited so often since its meaning seems to point to something else: God makes people pay dearly for the death of his faithful ones, that is, he is their avenger and holds people to account.

How have human beings reacted to the harsh necessity of death? One dismissive response has been not to think about it and to distract oneself. For Epicurus, for example, death is a non-issue: “So long as we are existent,” he said, “death is not present and whenever it is present we are nonexistent.”³⁵ Death, therefore, is not really a concern for us. This approach of exorcizing death is also found in the laws of the Napoleonic Code that placed cemeteries outside the city limits.

People also clung to positive remedies. The most universal one is having offspring and continuing to live through one’s descendants. Another was living on through fame: “I shall not wholly die (*“non omnis moriar”*),” said the Latin poet Horace, because “my reputation shall be green and growing.” “More durable than bronze . . . is the monument I have made.”³⁶ In Marxism, one survives through the society of the future, not as an individual but as a species.

Another one of these palliative remedies, which has been fabricated, is reincarnation. But this is foolishness. Those who profess this doctrine as an integral part of their culture and religion, and thus truly know what incarnation is, know that this is not a remedy or a consolation but a punishment. It is not an extension of life for pleasure but a purification. A soul is reincarnated because it still has something to atone for, and if one must do atonement, then one will have to suffer. The word of God cuts off all these delusive paths of escape: “It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb 9:27). Just once! The doctrine of reincarnation is thus incompatible with the faith of Christians.

Other remedies have appeared in our day. There is an international movement called “transhumanism.” It has many aspects, not all of which are negative, but at its core is the conviction that the human species, thanks to all the progress in technology, is on the path to surpassing itself radically, to the point of living for centuries or perhaps forever! According to one of its most famous representatives, Zoltan Istvan, the final goal will be “to become like God and conquer

³⁵ Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus,” trans. George K. Stodach (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 157.

³⁶ Horace, , *The Odes of Horace*, 3, 30, trans. James Michie (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), p. 203.

death.” A Jewish or Christian believer cannot help but immediately think of the identical words at the beginning of human history: “You will not die. . . . You will be like God” (Gen 3:4-5), with the result that we already know.

3. Death Was Swallowed Up in Victory

There is only one true remedy to death, and we Christians are robbing the world if we do not proclaim it by our words and our lives. Let us hear how the Apostle Paul announces this change to the world:

If many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. . . . If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (Rom 5:15-17)

The triumph of Christ over death is described with great lyricism in the First Letter to the Corinthians:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:54-57)

The decisive factor occurs at the moment of Christ’s death: “He died for all” (2 Cor 5:15). But what was so decisive at that moment to change the very nature of death? We can think of it visually this way. The Son of God descended into the tomb, like a dark prison, but he came out on the opposite side. He did not turn back to where he had entered, as Lazarus did and then had to die again. No, he opened a breach on the opposite side through which all those who believe in him can follow him.

An ancient Father writes, “He took upon himself the suffering of man, suffering in a body which could suffer, but through the Spirit that cannot die he slew death, which was slaying man.”³⁷ St. Augustine says, “By his passion our Lord passed from death to life and opened a way for us who believe in his resurrection that we too may pass over from death to life.”³⁸ Death becomes a passageway, and it is a passageway to what does not pass away! John Chrysostom says it well:

We do indeed die, but we do not continue in it: which is not to die at all. For the tyranny of death, and death indeed, is when he who dies is never more allowed to return to life. But when after dying is living, and that a better life, this is not death, but sleep.³⁹

³⁷ See Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, 66, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 2001), p. 54; see SCh 123, p. 96.

³⁸ St. Augustine, “Psalm 120,” 6, *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, Part 3, vol. 19, *The Works of Saint Augustine* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), p. 514.

³⁹ John Chrysostom, “Homily 17,” 4, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 14, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Reprinted by Veritatis Splendor, 2012), pp. 327-328; see PG 63, 129.

All these ways of explaining the meaning of the death of Christ are true, but they are not the most profound one. This one is found in what Christ, through his death, came to bring to the human condition, more so than what he came to remove from it: it is found in the love of God, not in the sin of human beings. If Jesus suffers and dies a violent death inflicted on him by hate, he does not do it merely to pay an insolvent debt owed by human beings (the debt of 10,000 talents in the parable is forgiven by the king!); he dies by crucifixion so that the suffering and death of human beings would be inhabited by love!

Human beings were condemned to die an absurd death all alone, but entering death they discover that it is now permeated by the love of God. Love could not dispense with death because of human freedom: the love of God cannot eliminate the tragic reality of evil and death by waving a magic wand. His love is constrained to allow suffering and death to have their say. But since love penetrated death and has filled it with the divine presence, love now has the last word.

4. What Changed about Death

What has then changed about death because of Jesus? Nothing and everything! Nothing in terms of our reason, but everything in terms of faith. The necessity of entering the tomb has not changed, but now there is the possibility of exiting from it. This is what the Orthodox icon of the resurrection illustrates so powerfully, and we can see a modern interpretation of it on the left wall of this *Redemptoris Mater Chapel*. The Risen One descends into hell and brings Adam and Eve out with him and behind them all those who are clinging to him in the infernal regions of that world.

This explains the believer's paradoxical attitude in the face of death, which is so similar to that of other people and yet so different. An attitude of sadness, fear, horror, since they know they must go down into the dark abyss, but also an attitude of hope since they know they are able to leave it. "Those saddened by the certainty of dying," says *Preface I for the Dead*, are "consoled by the promise of immortality to come." St. Paul wrote to the faithful in Thessalonica who were mourning the death of some among them,

We would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. (1 Thess 4:13-14)

Paul does not ask them not to grieve for those deaths but tells them "not to grieve as others do," as unbelievers do. Death is not the end of life for the believer but the beginning of real life; it is not a leap into the void but a leap into eternity. It is a *birth* and a *baptism*. It is a *birth* because only then does real life begin, the life that does not lead to death but lasts forever. For this reason the Church does not celebrate the feast of saints on the day of their physical birth but on the day of their birth in heaven, their "*dies natalis*." The connection between the earthly life of faith and eternal life is analogous to the connection between the life of an embryo in a mother's womb and the life of the baby once it is born. Nicholas Cabasilas writes,

It is this world which is in travail with that new inner man which is "created after the likeness of God." When he has been shaped and formed here he is thus born perfect into

that perfect world which grows not old. As nature prepares the foetus, while it is in its dark and fluid life, for that life which is in the light . . . , so likewise it happens to the saints.⁴⁰

Death is also a *baptism*. That is how Jesus describes his own death: “I have a baptism to be baptized with” (Lk 12:50). St. Paul speaks of baptism as being “buried therefore with him by baptism into death” (Rom 6:4). In ancient times, at the moment of baptism a person was completely immersed in water; all of one’s sins and one’s fallen human nature were buried in the water, and that person came forth a new creature, symbolized by the white robe he or she was wearing. The same thing happens in death: the caterpillar dies, the butterfly is born. God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). All those things are buried forever.

In various centuries, especially from the seventeenth century onward, one important aspect of Catholic asceticism consisted in the “preparation for death,”⁴¹ that is, in meditation on death and on a visual description of its different stages and its inexorable progression from the periphery of the body to the heart. Almost all the depictions of saints during this period show them with a skull nearby, even Francis of Assisi who had called death “sister.”

One of the tourist attractions in Rome continues to be the Capuchin Crypt on Via Veneto. One cannot deny that all of this can serve as a reminder that is still useful for an age that is as secularized and as unthinking as ours. This is especially true if a person reads the admonition inscribed above one of the skeletons: “What you are now we used to be; what we are now you will be.”

All of this, however, has given someone the pretext of saying that Christianity advances by means of the fear of death. But this is a terrible error. Christianity, as we have seen, is not here to increase the fear of death but to remove it; Christ came, says the Letter to the Hebrews, to “deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (Heb 2:15). Christianity does not advance because of the thought of our death but because of the thought of Christ’s death!

For this reason, it is much more effective to meditate on the passion and death of Jesus, rather than meditating on our own death, and we need to say—to give credit to the generations that preceded us—that such a meditation was the daily bread of spirituality during those past centuries.⁴² It is a meditation that generates emotion and gratitude, not anxiety; it makes us exclaim, like the Apostle Paul, Christ “loved me and gave himself for me!” (Gal 2:20).

A “pious exercise” that I would like to recommend to everyone during Lent is to pick up a Gospel and read the entire account of the passion, slowly and on your own. It takes less than a half an hour. I knew an intellectual woman who claimed to be an atheist. One day she unexpectedly got the kind of news that leaves people stunned: her sixteen-year-old daughter had a bone tumor. They

⁴⁰ Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, 1, 2 trans. Camino J. deCatanzaro (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1974), p. 44.

⁴¹ See St. Alphonsus Ligouri’s 1758 book, *Preparation for Death [Apparecchio alla morte]* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1982).

⁴² See St. Alphonsus Ligouri’s 1760 book, *Reflections and Affections on the Passion of Jesus Christ [Considerazioni sopra la passione di Gesù Cristo]*, trans. Eugene Grimm, vol. 5, *The Ascetical Works* (reprint of the 1887 edition by Kassock Brothers publishing, 2014).

operated on her. The girl returned from the operating room with an IV drip and all kinds of tubes coming out of her. She was suffering horribly and groaning; she did not want to hear any words of comfort.

Her mother, knowing her daughter to be pious and religious and thinking it would please her, asked her, “Do you want me to read you something from the Gospel?” “Yes, Mamma.” “What do you want me to read?” “Read me the passion.” The mother, who had never read a Gospel, ran to buy one from chaplains; she sat next to her daughter’s bed and began to read. After a while the daughter fell asleep, but the mother continued reading silently in semi-darkness right to the end. “The daughter fell asleep,” she said in the book she wrote after her daughter’s death, “and the mother woke up!” She woke up from her atheism. Reading the passion of Christ had changed her life forever.⁴³

Let us end with the simple but powerful prayer from the liturgy, “*Adoramus te, Christe, et benedicimus tibi, quia per sanctam tuam redemisti mundum,*” We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.”

Translated from Italian by Marsha Daigle Williamson

⁴³ See Rosanna Garofalo, *Sopra le ali dell’aquila* (Milan: Ancora, 1993).

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap
Lent 2017
Fourth Sermon

THE HOLY SPIRIT INTRODUCES US TO THE MYSTERY
OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

In the first two Lenten meditations we reflected on the Holy Spirit who leads us into all the truth about the person of Christ, causing him to be proclaimed as “Lord” and “true God.” In the last meditation we moved on from the being of Christ to the work of Christ, from his person to his action, and in particular the mystery of his redemptive death. Today I propose that we meditate on the mystery of his resurrection and of our resurrection.

St. Paul expressly attributes the resurrection of Jesus from the dead to the work of the Holy Spirit. He says that Christ was “designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4). In Christ is the fulfillment of the great prophecy by Ezekiel about the Spirit who enters into the dry bones, raises them from their graves, and makes of this slain multitude “an exceedingly great host” of people resurrected to life and hope (see Ezek 37:1-14).

But this is not the line I want to pursue in this meditation. Making the Holy Spirit the main inspirer of all theology (which is the intent of what is called “Theology of Third Article!”) does not mean forcing the Holy Spirit into every assertion, mentioning him at every turn. This would not be in the nature of the Paraclete who, like light, illuminates everything while remaining, so to speak, in the background himself as though behind the scenes. More than speaking “about” the Holy Spirit, the Theology of the Third Article involves speaking “in” the Holy Spirit, with all that this simple change of preposition entails.

1. The Resurrection of Christ: The Historical Approach

Let us first of all say something about the resurrection of Christ as a “historical” fact. Can we define the resurrection as an historical event in the normal sense of this word—something that really happened—insofar as history is in contrast to myth and legend? To express it in the words of the recent debate: Is Jesus risen only in the kerygma, that is, in the proclamation of the Church (as someone has affirmed in the wake of Rudolf Bultmann), or did he also rise in reality and in history? In other words, is he, the *person* of Jesus, truly risen, or is it only his *cause* that has risen—in the metaphoric sense in which “rising again” means the survival or the victorious reemergence of an idea after the death of the one who proposed it?

Let us see, then, in what sense there can be an historical approach to the resurrection of Christ. Not because some of us here need to be persuaded about that, but, as Luke says at the beginning of his Gospel, “that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed” (Lk 1:4) and concerning what we transmit to others.

The faith of the disciples, with a few exceptions (John and the devout women), does not hold up under the test of Jesus' tragic end. After his passion and death, a pall is cast over everything. The disciples' inner state is revealed through the words of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus: "We had hoped that he was the one It is now the third day since this happened" (Lk 24:21). Faith is at a stalemate. The case of Jesus is considered closed.

Now—still from the historians' point of view—let us move ahead to a year, or even to a few weeks later. What do we find? A group of men, the same ones who were with Jesus, who are now repeating loudly that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Lord, the Son of God, that he is alive and will come to judge the world. The case of Jesus is not only reopened, but in a brief amount of time it has also shifted to an absolute and universal dimension. This man is of interest now not only to the people of Israel but to all human beings of all times. "The very stone which the builders rejected," says St. Peter, "has become the head of the corner" (1 Pet 2:7), that is, the beginning of a new humanity. From now on, whether people know it or not, there is no other name under heaven given to human beings by which they can be saved except the name of Jesus of Nazareth (see Acts 4:12).

What caused such a change in these same men who had earlier denied Jesus or run away but who now declare these things publicly, who establish churches, and who even allow themselves to be imprisoned, whipped, and killed for him? They all answer in unison: "He is risen! We have seen him!" The final act the historian can perform, before yielding the floor to faith, is to verify this response.

The resurrection is an historical event in a very particular sense. It is at the border of history, like the line that divides the sea from the land. It is inside and outside of history at the same time. With it, history opens itself up to what is beyond history, to eschatology. It therefore represents, in a certain sense, a break with history and a move beyond it, just like the creation did at its beginning. This makes the resurrection an event that cannot be attested to and accessed in itself by our mental categories that are wholly tied to our experience of time and space. No one was actually present at the moment Jesus was resurrected. No one can say they saw Jesus being resurrected but only that they saw him once he was risen. But they saw his empty tomb.

The resurrection, therefore, is known a posteriori, after the fact. It is like the physical presence of the Word in Mary afterward that demonstrates his Incarnation; likewise it is the spiritual presence of Christ in the community afterward, attested by his appearances, that demonstrates he has risen. This explains why no secular historian says a word about his resurrection. Tacitus, who does record the death of a certain "Christus" at the time of Pontius Pilate,⁴⁴ is silent about the resurrection. That event had no relevance or meaning except for people who experienced its aftermath within the community.

In what sense, then, do we speak of an historical approach to the resurrection? Two facts are offered for consideration to historians that allow them to speak about the resurrection: first, the sudden and inexplicable faith of the disciples, a faith so tenacious that it withstands even the test of martyrdom; second, the explanation of such a faith left to us by those involved. An eminent

⁴⁴ Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 15, trans. Michael Grant, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 365.

exegete has written, “In the hour of crisis [after Jesus was crucified] the disciples held no . . . assurance [of a resurrection]. They fled (Mark 14:50), and gave up Jesus’ cause for lost (Luke 24:19-21). Something must have happened in between, which in a short time not only produced a complete reversal of their attitude but also enabled them to engage in renewed activity and to found the primitive Christian community. This ‘something’ is the historical kernel of the Easter faith.”⁴⁵

It has been correctly observed that if the historical and objective character of the resurrection is denied, the birth of faith and of the Church would be a mystery that is even more inexplicable than the resurrection itself: “The assumption that the whole great course of Christian history is a massive pyramid balanced upon the apex of some trivial occurrence is surely a less probable one than that the whole event, the occurrence plus the meaning inherent in it, did actually occupy a place in history at least comparable with that which the New Testament assigns to it.”⁴⁶

What then is the ultimate point that historical research can reach concerning the resurrection? We can find it in the words of the disciples at Emmaus. Some disciples on the morning of Easter went to Jesus’ tomb and found that things were just as the women had reported when they were there earlier, “but him they did not see” (Lk 24:24). History also goes to Jesus’ tomb and must ascertain that things were as the witnesses had said. But him, the Risen One, history does not see. It is not enough to ascertain the facts historically; there is also a need to see the Risen One, and history cannot offer that; only faith can.⁴⁷ A man running from the mainland who reaches the shore of the sea has to stop abruptly; he can continue to push forward with his gaze, but not with his feet.

2. The Apologetic Significance of the Resurrection

As we move from history to faith, the manner of speaking about the resurrection also changes. The language of the New Testament and the liturgy of the Church is assertive, authoritative, and does not base itself on dialectical demonstrations. “In fact Christ has been raised from the dead” (1 Cor 15:20), Paul says. Period. We are now on the level of faith and no longer on the level of historical argument. It is what we call the kerygma. “*Scimus Christum surrexisse a mortuis vere,*” says the Liturgy on the day of Easter: “We know that Christ is truly risen from the dead.” Not only do we believe it, but having believed it, we also know it to be true, and we are certain of it. The surest proof of the resurrection comes after we have believed, not before, because it is at that point that we experience that Jesus is alive.

But what exactly is the resurrection from the point of view of faith? It is the testimony of God about Jesus Christ. God the Father, who had already attested to Jesus of Nazareth during his life through signs and wonders, has now set a definitive seal to his endorsement of him by raising him from the dead. St. Paul, in his discourse in Athens, formulates it this way: “By raising him from the dead, God has given assurance about him to all men” (see Acts 17:31). The resurrection is God’s powerful “yes,” his “Amen” to the life of his Son Jesus.

⁴⁵ Martin Dibelius, *Jesus*, trans. Charles B. Hedrick and Frederick C. Grant (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), p. 141.

⁴⁶ Charles H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel* (London: Nisbet, 1952), p. 109.

⁴⁷ See Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary*, X, 1, A, 481, trans. Peter P. Rohde (New York: Carol Publishing, 1993), pp. 163-165.

The death of Christ was not in itself sufficient to testify to the truth of his cause. Many people—and we have tragic proof of that these days—die for mistaken causes, and even for evil causes. Their deaths have not made their cause true; their deaths only prove that they believed in its truth. The death of Christ is not a guarantee of his truth but of his love, since “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13).

Only the resurrection, therefore, constitutes the seal of Christ’s authentic divinity. This is why Jesus responds one day to those who asked for a sign, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (see Jn 2:18ff), and in another place he says, “No sign shall be given to this generation except the sign of Jonah,” who, after three days in the belly of the whale, saw daylight again (see Matt 16:4). Paul is right to build the whole edifice of faith on the resurrection as its foundation: “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God. . . . We are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15, 14-15, 19). We understand why St. Augustine can say that “the faith of Christians is in the resurrection of Christ”; everyone, even pagans, believes that Christ died, but only Christians believe that he is risen, and there is no Christian who does not believe that.⁴⁸

3. The “mystic” significance of the Resurrection of Christ

Up to now the *apologetic* significance of Christ’s resurrection aimed at establishing the authenticity of Christ’s mission and the legitimacy of his claim to divinity. We need to add to this a wholly new significance that we could call the mystic or salvific aspect in what concerns us believers. The resurrection of Christ concerns us and is a mystery “for us” because it is the basis of hope for our own resurrection from the dead:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you. (Rom 8:11)

Faith in a life in the otherworld appears in a clear and explicit way only toward the end of the Old Testament. The Second Book of Maccabees constitutes its most developed testimony: one of the seven brothers killed under Antiochus exclaims that after they die, “the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life” (2 Mac 7:9; see 2:1-14). But this faith does not come suddenly of nowhere; it is vitally rooted in previous biblical revelation and represents its natural conclusion and its more mature fruit, so to speak.

Two certainties in particular led the people of Israel to this conclusion: certainty about the omnipotence of God and certainty about the insufficiency and injustice of earthly recompense. It appeared more and more evident—especially after the experience of the exile—that the fate of good people in this world is such that, without the hope of a different reward for the righteous after death, it would be impossible not to fall into despair. In this life, in fact, the same things happen to the righteous and the wicked, whether it be happiness or misfortune. Ecclesiastes represents the clearest expression of this bitter conclusion (see Eccles 7:15).

⁴⁸ St. Augustine, “Psalm 120,” 6, *Expositions of the Psalms 99-120*, trans. Maria Boulding, part 3, vol. 19, ed. John E. Rotelle (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), p. 15; see CCL, 40, p. 1791.

Jesus' thinking on this issue is expressed in his discussion with the Sadducees on the fate of a woman who had had seven husbands (see Lk 20:27-38). In keeping with the most ancient biblical revelation, the Mosaic revelation, the Sadducees had not accepted the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and considered it an undue innovation. Referring to the Mosaic law concerning Levirate marriage (see Deut 25, where a widowed woman without sons is to marry her brother-in-law), they speculate about the hypothetical case of a woman who married seven husbands consecutively based on that law. At the end, confident of having demonstrated the absurdity of resurrection, they ask, "In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?" (Lk 20:33).

Without shifting away from the Mosaic law, the ground chosen by his adversaries, Jesus reveals in a few words first the error of the Sadducees and then corrects it; next, he gives the most profound and most convincing foundation for faith in the resurrection. Jesus gives his opinion about two things: the *manner* and the *fact* of resurrection. As for the *fact* that there will be a resurrection of the dead, Jesus recalls the episode of the burning bush when God identifies himself as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." If God identifies himself as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" when these three men have been dead for generations and if, in addition, "God is the God of the living and not of the dead," then it means that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive somewhere!

However, more than on his response to the Sadducees, faith in the resurrection is based on the *fact* of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. "If Christ is preached as raised from the dead," Paul exclaims, "how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised!" (1 Cor 15:12-13). It is absurd to think of a body whose head reigns gloriously in heaven and whose body decays forever on earth or ends in nothingness.

Furthermore, Christian faith in the resurrection of the dead responds to the most instinctive desire of the human heart. St. Paul says that we do not want to be "unclothed" of our bodies but to be "further clothed," that is, we do not want only one part of our being—our soul—to go on living but all of who we are, soul and body. Therefore, we do not want our mortal bodies to be destroyed but to be "swallowed up by life," and to "put on immortality" (see 2 Cor 5:1-5; 15:51-53).

In this life we have not only a promise of eternal life, we also have the "first fruits" and the "first installment." We should never translate the Greek word *arrabon* used by St. Paul about the Spirit (see 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Ephes 1:14) as "pledge" (*pignus*) but only as "first installment" or "deposit" (*arra*). St. Augustine explains the difference clearly. A pledge, he says, is not the beginning of the payment but is money given to certify future payment. Once the payment is made, the pledge is returned. That is not the case with a deposit. A deposit is not returned when the payment is completed because it is already part of the payment. If God by his Spirit has given us love as a first installment, when he brings the fullness of what he has promised, will he take back the first installment he has given us? Of course not; instead he will bring the fullness of what has already been given.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ See St. Augustine, "Sermon 23," 9, *Sermons II (20-50) on the Old Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill, Part 3, vol. 2, The Works of Saint Augustine, ed. John E. Rotelle (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), p. 60.

Just as the “first fruits” announce a full harvest and are part of it, so too the first installment is part of the full possession of the Spirit. It is “the Spirit who dwells in us” (see Rom 8:11)—more so than the immortality of the soul—that, as we see, assures the continuity between our present life and our future life.

Concerning the *manner* of resurrection, on this same occasion with the Sadducees Jesus describes the spiritual situation of the resurrected: “Those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Lk 20:35-36).

One can attempt to illustrate the transition from the earthly state to the resurrected state with examples drawn from nature: the seed from which the tree springs up, lifeless nature in winter that is revived in spring, the caterpillar that is transformed into the butterfly. Paul simply says, “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:42-44).

The truth is that everything regarding our condition in the afterlife remains an impenetrable mystery. It is not because God wants to keep it hidden from us but because—as limited as we are in having to think of everything within the categories of time and space—we lack the tools to portray it to ourselves. Eternity is not an entity that exists separately and that can be defined in itself, almost as if it were a period time that stretches out eternally. It is the mode of God’s being. Eternity is God! To enter into eternal life simply means to be admitted, by grace, to share God’s mode of being.

None of this would have been possible if eternity had not first entered into time. It is in the risen Christ, and thanks to him, that we can be clothed with God’s mode of being. St. Paul describes what awaits him after death as “departing and being with Christ” (see Phil 1:23). The same thing can be deduced from Jesus’ words to the good thief: “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43). Paradise is being “with Christ,” as his “co-heirs.” Eternal life is a reuniting of the members to the head to form one “entity” with him in glory, after having been united to him in suffering (see Rom 8:17).

A delightful story narrated by a modern German writer helps us have a better idea of eternal life than any attempts at rational speculation. In a medieval monastery there were two monks who had a deep spiritual friendship. One was called Rufus and the other Rufinus. They spent all their free time trying to imagine and describe what eternal life would be like in the heavenly Jerusalem. Rufus was a builder, so he imagined it as a city with doors of gold studded with precious stones. Rufinus was an organist, so he imagined it as full of heavenly music.

In the end they made a pact that whichever one of them died first would return the following night to reassure his friend that things were in fact as they had imagined. One word would be enough. If things were as they had imagined, he would simply say, “*Taliter!*” “Exactly!” But if things were different—and this seemed completely impossible—he would say, “*Aliter!*” “Different!”

While playing the organ one night, Rufinus died of a heart attack. His friend Rufus stayed awake all night anxiously, but nothing. He kept vigils and fasted for weeks and months, but nothing. Finally on the anniversary of his death, Rufinus entered his friend's cell at night surrounded by a circle of light. Seeing that Rufinus was silent, Rufus, sure of an affirmative answer, asked his friend, "*Taliter?* Isn't that right?" But his friend shook his head no. Rufus desperately cried out, "*Aliter?* It's different?" And again his friend shook his head no. Finally two words suddenly came forth from his silent friend: "*Totaliter aliter*" "Completely different!" Rufus understood instantly that heaven was infinitely more than what they had imagined and could not be described. He also died shortly after because of his desire to be there.⁵⁰

The story is of course a legend, but its content is very biblical. "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). St. Symeon the New Theologian, one of the most beloved saints in the Orthodox Church, had a vision one day. He was certain he had gazed on God himself and, certain that nothing could ever be greater or more glorious than what he had seen, he said, "It is enough for me to be in this state even after death!" The Lord answered him, "You are indeed too fainthearted to be contented with this. Compared with the blessings to come, this is like a description of heaven on paper . . . [and is] inferior to the reality, the glory that will be revealed."⁵¹

When people want to cross a stretch of sea, said St. Augustine, the most important thing is not to stay on the shore and squint to see what is on the opposite shore but to get in a boat that takes them to that shore.⁵² For us as well, the most important thing is not to speculate about what eternal life will be like for us but to do the things we know will get us there. May our day today be a small step in that direction.

Translated from Italian by Marsha Daigle Williamson

⁵⁰ Hans Franck, *Der Regenbogen: Siebenmalsieben Geschichten* (Leipzig: H. Haessel, 1927).

⁵¹ St. Symeon the New Theologian, "Thanksgiving at the Threshold of Total Illumination," *The Discourses*, trans. C. J. deCatanzaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 375.

⁵² St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 4, 15, 20, p. 172; see also *Confessions* 7, 21, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image books, 1963), pp.179-180.

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap
Fifth Lenten Sermon 2017

“THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD HAS BEEN MANIFESTED”:
The Fifth Centenary of the Protestant Reformation,
an Occasion of Grace and Reconciliation for the Whole Church

1. The Origins of the Protestant Reformation

The Holy Spirit, who, as we saw in the preceding meditations, leads us into the fullness of truth about the person of Christ and his paschal mystery, also enlightens us on a crucial aspect of our faith in Christ, that is, on how we obtain in the Church today the salvation Christ accomplished for us. In other words, the Holy Spirit enlightens us on the important question of justification by faith for sinners. I believe that trying to shed light on history and on the current state of that discussion is the most useful way to make the anniversary of the Fifth Centenary of the Protestant Reformation an occasion of grace and reconciliation for the whole Church.

We cannot dispense with rereading the whole passage from the Letter to the Romans on which that discussion is centered. It says,

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. (Rom 3:21-28)

How could it have happened that such a comforting and clear message became the bone of contention at the heart of western Christianity, splitting the Church and Europe into two different religious continents? Even today, for the average believer in certain countries in Northern Europe, that doctrine constitutes the dividing line between Catholicism and Protestantism. I myself have had faithful Lutheran lay people ask me, “Do you believe in justification by faith?” as the condition for them to hear what I had to say. This doctrine is defined by those who began the Reformation themselves as “the article by which the Church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis et cadentis Ecclesiae*).

We need to go back to Martin Luther’s famous “tower experience” that took place in 1511 or 1512. (It is referred to this way because it is thought to have occurred in a cell at the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg called “the Tower”). Luther was in torment, almost to the point of desperation and resentment toward God, because all his religious and penitential observances did not succeed in making him feel accepted by God and at peace with him. It was here that suddenly

Paul's word in Romans 1:17 flashed through his mind: "The just shall live by faith." It was a liberating experience. Recounting this experience himself when he was close to death, he wrote, "When I discovered this, I felt I was reborn, and it seemed that the doors of paradise opened up for me."⁵³

Some Lutheran historians rightly go back to this moment some years before 1517 as the real beginning of the Reformation. What transformed this inner experience into a real religious chain reaction was the issue of indulgences, which made Luther decide to nail his famous 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. It is important to note the historical succession of these facts. It tells us that the thesis of justification by faith and not by works was not the result of a polemic with the Church of his time but its cause. It was a genuine illumination from above, an "experience," "*Erlebnis*," as he himself described it.

A question immediately arises: how do we explain the earthquake that was caused by the position Luther took? What was there about it that was so revolutionary? St. Augustine had given the same explanation for the expression "righteousness of God" many centuries earlier. "The righteousness of God [*justitia Dei*]," he wrote, "is the righteousness by which, through his grace, we become justified, exactly the way that the salvation of God [*salus Dei*] (Ps 3:9) is the salvation by which God saves us."⁵⁴

St. Gregory the Great had said, "We do not attain faith from virtue but virtue from faith."⁵⁵ And St. Bernard had said, "What I cannot obtain on my own, I confidently appropriate (*usurpo!*) from the pierced side of the Lord because he is full of mercy. . . . And what about *my* righteousness? O Lord, I will remember only *your* righteousness. In fact it is also mine because you became God's justification for me (see 1 Cor 1:30)."⁵⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas went even further. Commenting on the Pauline saying that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (see 2 Cor 3:6), he writes that the "letter" also includes the moral precepts of the gospel, so "even the letter of the gospel would kill if the grace of faith that heals were not added to it."⁵⁷

The Council of Trent, convened in response to the Reformation, did not have any difficulty in reaffirming the primacy of faith and grace, while still maintaining (as would the branch of the Reformation that followed John Calvin) the necessity of works and the observance of the laws in the context of the whole process of salvation, according to the Pauline formula of "faith working through love" ("*fides quae per caritatem operatur*") (Gal 5:6).⁵⁸ This explains how, in the context of the new climate of ecumenical dialogue, it was possible for the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation to arrive at a joint declaration on justification by grace through faith that was signed on October 31, 1999, which acknowledges a fundamental, if not yet total, agreement on that doctrine.

⁵³ Martin Luther, "Preface to his Latin Works," Weimar ed., vol. 54, p. 186.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 32, 56 (PL 44, 237).

⁵⁵ Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezekiel*, 2, 7 (PL 76, 1018).

⁵⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the "Song of Songs"*, 61, 4-5 (PL 183, 1072).

⁵⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1-IIae, q. 106, a.2.

⁵⁸ Council of Trent, "*Decretum de iustificatione*," 7, in Denziger and Schoenmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, ed. 34, n. 1531.

So was the Protestant Reformation a case of “much ado about nothing?” The result of a misunderstanding? We need to answer with a firm “No”! It is true that the magisterium of the Church had never reversed any decisions made by preceding councils (especially against the Pelagians); it had never forgotten what Augustine, Gregory, Bernard, and Thomas Aquinas had written. Human revolutions do not break out, however, because of ideas or abstract theories but because of concrete historical situations, and unfortunately for a long time the praxis of the Church was not truly reflecting its official doctrine. Church life, catechesis, Christian piety, spiritual direction, not to mention popular preaching—all these things seemed to affirm just the opposite, that what really matters is in fact works, human effort. In addition, “good works” were not generally understood to mean the works listed by Jesus in Matthew 25, without which, he says, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Instead, “good works” meant pilgrimages, votive candles, novenas, and donations to the Church, and as compensation for doing these things, indulgences.

The phenomenon had deep roots common to all of Christianity and not just Latin Christianity. After Christianity became the state religion, faith was something that was absorbed instinctively through the family, school, and society. It was not as important to emphasize the moment in which faith was born and a person’s decision to become a believer as it was to emphasize the practical requirements of the faith, in other words, morals and behavior.

One revealing sign of this shift of focus is noted by Henri de Lubac in his *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*. In its most ancient phase, the sequence of the four senses was the literal historical sense, the christological or faith sense, the moral sense, and the eschatological sense.⁵⁹ However, that sequence was increasingly substituted by a different one in which the moral sense came before the christological or the faith sense. “What to do” came before “what to believe”; duty came first before gift. In spiritual life, people thought, first comes the path of purification then that of illumination and union.⁶⁰ Without realizing it, people ended up saying exactly the opposite of what Gregory the Great had written when he said, “We do not attain faith from virtue but virtue from faith.”

2. The Doctrine of Justification by Faith after Luther

After Luther and very soon after the two other great reformers, Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, the doctrine of the free gift of justification by faith resulted, for those who lived by it, in an unquestionable improvement in the quality of Christian life, thanks to the circulation of the word of God in the vernacular, to numerous inspired hymns and songs, and to written aids made accessible to people by the recent invention of the printing press and distribution of printed materials.

On the external front, the thesis of justification only by faith became the dividing line between Catholicism and Protestantism. Very soon (and in part with Luther himself) this opposition broadened out to become an opposition between Christianity and Judaism as well, with Catholics

⁵⁹ The classical couplet that sets forth this sequence is “*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria. / Moralis quid agas; quo tendas anagogia*”: “The literal sense proclaims the events, the allegorical sense what you should believe. / The moral sense what you should do, the anagogical sense where you are going.”

⁶⁰ See Henri de Lubac, *Histoire de l’exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l’Écriture* (Paris, Aubier, 1959), vol. 1, 1, pp. 139-157.

representing, according to some, the continuation of Jewish legalism and ritualism, and Protestants representing the Christian innovation.

Anti-Catholic polemic was joined to anti-Jewish polemic that, for other reasons, was no less present in the Catholic world. According to this perspective, Christianity was formed in opposition to—and was not derived from—Judaism. Starting with Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), the theory of two souls in early Christianity increasingly gained ground: Petrine Christianity, as expressed in the so-called “proto-catholicism “ (*Frühkatholizismus*), and Pauline Christianity that finds its more complete expression in Protestantism.

This belief led to distancing the Christian religion as far as possible from Judaism. People would try to explain the doctrines and Christian mysteries (including the title *Kyrios*, Lord, and the divine worship owed to Jesus) as the result of contact with Hellenism. The criterion used to judge the authenticity of a saying or a fact from the gospel was how different it was from what characterized the Jewish world of that time. Even if that approach was not the main reason for the tragic anti-Semitism that followed, it is certain that, together with the accusation of deicide, it encouraged anti-Semitism by giving it a tacit religious covering.

Beginning in the 1970s, there was a radical reversal in this area of biblical studies. It is necessary to say something about it to clarify the current state of the Pauline and Lutheran doctrine of the free gift of justification through faith in Christ. The nature and the aim of my talk exempt me from citing the names of the modern writers engaged in this debate. Whoever is versed in this subject will not have difficulty identifying the authors of the theories alluded to here to, but for others, I think, it is not the names but the ideas that are of interest.

This reversal involves the so-called “third quest of the historical Jesus.” (It is called “third” after the liberal quest of the 1800s and then that of Rudolf Bultmann and his followers in the 1900s). This new perspective recognizes Judaism as the true matrix within which Christianity was formed, debunking the myth of the irreducible otherness of Christianity with respect to Judaism. The criterion used to assess the major or minor probability that a saying or fact about Jesus’ life is authentic is its compatibility with the Judaism of his time—not its incompatibility, as people at one time thought.

Certain advantages of this new approach are obvious. The continuity of revelation is recovered. Jesus is situated within the Jewish world in the line of biblical prophets. It also does more justice to the Judaism of Jesus’ time, demonstrating its richness and variety. The problem is that this approach went too far so that this gain was transformed into a loss. In many representatives of this third quest, Jesus ends up dissolving into the Jewish world completely, without any longer being distinct except through a few particular interpretations of the *Torah*. He is reduced to being one of the Hebrew prophets, an “itinerant charismatic,” “a Mediterranean Jewish peasant,” as someone has written. The continuity with Judaism has been recovered, but at the expense of the newness of the New Testament. The new historical quest has produced studies on a whole different level (for example, those of James D. G. Dunn, my favorite New Testament scholar), but what I have sketched out is the version that is most widely circulated on the popular level and has influenced public opinion.

The person who shed light on the misleading character of this approach for the purposes of serious dialogue between Judaism and Christianity was precisely a Jew, the American rabbi, Jacob Neusner.⁶¹ Whoever has read Benedict XVI's book on Jesus of Nazareth is already familiar with much of the thinking of this rabbi with whom he dialogues in one of the most fascinating chapters of his book. Jesus cannot be considered a Jew like other Jews, Neusner explains, given that he puts himself above Moses and proclaims that he is "Lord also of the Sabbath."

But it is especially in regard to St. Paul that the "new perspective" demonstrates its inadequacy. According to one of its most famous representatives, the religion of works, against which the Apostle rails with such vehemence in his letters, does not exist in real life. Judaism, even in the time of Jesus, is a "covenantal nomism," that is, a religion based on the free initiative of God and his love; the observance of his laws is the consequence of a relationship with God, not its cause. The law serves to help people remain in the covenant rather than to enter it. The Jewish religion continues to be that of the patriarchs and prophets, and its center is *hesed*, grace and divine benevolence.

Scholars then have to look for possible targets of Paul's polemic: not the "Jews" but the "Jewish-Christians," or a kind of "Zealot" Judaism that feels itself threatened by the pagan world around it and reacts in the manner of the Maccabees—in brief, the Judaism of Paul prior to his conversion that led him to persecute Hellenistic believers like Stephen. But these explanations appear immediately unsustainable and result in making the apostle's thinking incomprehensible and contradictory. In the preceding part of his letter, the apostle formulates a indictment as universal as humanity itself: "There is no distinction; . . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3: 22-23). Three times in the first three chapters of this letter he returns to the wording "Jews and Greeks alike." How can anyone think that to such a universal evil a remedy corresponds which is aimed at a very limited group of believers?

3. Justification by Faith: A Doctrine of Paul or of Jesus?

The difficulty comes, in my opinion, from the fact that the exegesis of Paul is carried on at times as if the doctrine began with him and as if Jesus had said nothing on this matter. The doctrine of the free gift of justification by faith is not Paul's invention but is the central message of the gospel of Christ, whether it was made known to Paul by a direct revelation from the Risen One or by the "tradition" that he says he received, which was certainly not limited to a few words about the kerygma (see 1 Cor 15:3). If this were not the case, then those who say that Paul, not Jesus, is the real founder of Christianity would be correct.

However, the core of this doctrine is already found in the word "gospel," "good news," that Paul certainly did not invent out of thin air. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus went around proclaiming, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). How could this proclamation be called "good news" if it were only an intimidating call to change one's life? What Christ includes in the expression "kingdom of God"—that is, the salvific initiative by God, his offer of salvation to all humanity—St. Paul calls the "righteousness of God," but it refers to the same fundamental reality. "The kingdom of God" and

⁶¹ Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

“the righteousness of God” are coupled together by Jesus himself when he says, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33).

When Jesus said, “repent, and believe the gospel,” he was thus already teaching justification by faith. Before him, “to repent” always meant “to turn back,” as indicated by the Hebrew word *shub*; it meant to turn back, through a renewed observance of the law, to the covenant that had been broken. “To repent,” consequently, had a meaning that was mainly ascetic, moral, and penitential, and it was implemented by changing one’s behavior. Repentance was seen as a condition for salvation; it meant “repent and you will be saved; repent and salvation will come to you.” This was the meaning of “repent” up to this point, including on the lips of John the Baptist.

When Jesus speaks of repentance, *metanoia*, its moral meaning moves into second place (at least at the beginning of his preaching) with respect to a new, previously unknown meaning. Repenting no longer means turning back to the covenant and the observance of the law. It means instead taking a leap forward, entering into a new covenant, seizing this kingdom that has appeared, and entering into it. And entering it by faith. “Repent and believe” does not point to two different successive steps but to the same action: repent, that is, believe; repent by believing! Repenting does not signify “mending one’s ways” so much as “perceiving” something new and thinking in a new way. The humanist Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457), in his *Adnotations on the New Testament*, had already highlighted this new meaning of the word *metanoia* in Mark’s text.

Innumerable sayings from the gospel, among the ones that most certainly go back to Jesus, confirm this interpretation. One is Jesus’ insistence on the necessity of becoming like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. A characteristic of children is that they have nothing to give and can only receive. They do not ask anything from their parents because they have earned it but simply because they know they are loved. They accept what is freely given.

The Pauline polemic against the claim to be saved by one’s own works also does not begin with him. We would need to exclude an endless number of texts to remove all the polemic references in the gospel to a number of “scribes, Pharisees, and doctors of the law.” We cannot fail to recognize in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in the temple the two types of religiosity that St. Paul later contrasts: one man trusts in his own religious performance and the other trusts in the mercy of God and returns home “justified” (Lk 18:14).

It is not a temptation present only in one particular religion, but in every religion, including of course Christianity. (The Evangelists didn’t relate the sayings of Jesus to correct the Pharisees, but to warn the Christians!) If Paul takes aim at Judaism, it is because that is the religious context in which he and those to whom he is speaking live, but it involves a religious rather than an ethnic category. Jews, in this context, are those who, unlike the pagans, are in possession of revelation; they know God’s will and, emboldened by this fact, they feel themselves secure with God and can judge the rest of humanity. One indication that Paul was designating a religious category is that Origen was already saying in the third century that the target of the apostle’s words are now the “heads of the Church: bishops, presbyters, and deacons,” that is, the guides, the teachers of the people.⁶²

⁶² Origen, *Commentary on the “Letter to the Romans,”* 2, 2 (PG 14, 873).

The difficulty in reconciling the picture that Paul gives us of the Jewish religion and what we know about it from other sources is based on a fundamental error in methodology. Jesus and Paul are dealing with life as people lived it, with the heart; scholars deal instead with books and written testimonies. Oral and written statements tell us what people know they should be or would like to be, but not necessarily what they are. No one should be surprised to find in the Scripture and rabbinical sources of the time moving and sincere affirmations about grace, mercy, and the prevenient initiative of God. But it is one thing to say what Scripture says and leaders teach and another thing to say what is in people's hearts and what governs their actions.

What happened at the time of the Protestant Reformation helps us to understand this situation during the time of Jesus and Paul. At the time of the Reformation, if one looks at the doctrine taught in the schools of theology, at ancient definitions that were never disputed, at Augustine's writings that were held in great honor, or even only at the *Imitation of Christ* that was daily reading for pious souls, one will find there the magnificent doctrine of grace and will not understand whom Luther was fighting against. But if one looks at what was going on in real life in the Church, the result, as we have seen, is quite different.

4. How to Preach Justification by Faith Today

What can we conclude from this bird's-eye view of the five centuries since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation? It is indeed vital that the centenary of the Reformation not be wasted, that it not remain a prisoner of the past and try to determine rights and wrongs, even if that is done in a more irenic tone than in the past. We need instead to take a leap forward, the way a river that finds itself blocked resumes its course at a higher level.

The situation has changed since then. The issues that brought about the separation between the Church of Rome and the Reformation were above all indulgences and how sinners are justified. But can we say that these are the problems on which people's faith stands or falls today? I remember Cardinal Kasper on one occasion making this observation: For Luther the number one existential problem was how to overcome the sense of guilt and find a gracious God; today the problem is rather the opposite: how to restore to human beings a genuine sense of sin that they have completely lost.

This does not mean ignoring the enrichment brought by the Reformation and wanting to return to the situation before it. It means rather allowing all of Christianity to benefit from its many important achievements once they are freed from certain distortions and excesses due to the overheated climate of the moment and the need to correct major abuses.

Among the negative aspects resulting from the centuries-old emphasis on the issue of the justification of sinners, it seems to me one is having made western Christianity be a gloomy proclamation, completely focused on sin, that the secular culture ended up resisting and rejecting. The most important thing is not what Jesus, by his death, has *removed* from human beings—sin—but what he has *given* to them, that is, his Holy Spirit. Many exegetes today consider the third chapter of the letter to the Romans on justification by faith to be inseparable from the eighth chapter on the gift of the Spirit and to be one piece with it.

The free gift of justification through faith in Christ should be preached today by the whole Church and with more vigor than ever. Not, however, in contrast to the “works” the New Testament speaks of but in contrast to the claim of post-modern people of being able to save themselves with their science and technology or with an improvised, comforting spirituality. These are the “works” that modern human beings rely on. I am convinced that if Luther came back to life, this would be the way that he too would preach justification by faith today.

There is another thing that we all—Lutherans and Catholics—should learn from the man who initiated the Reformation. As we saw, for Luther the free gift of justification by faith was above all a lived experience and only later something about which to theorize. After him justification though faith became increasingly a theological thesis to defend or to oppose and less and less a personal, liberating experience to be lived out in one’s intimate relationship with God. The joint declaration of 1999 very appropriately points out that the consensus reached by Catholics and Lutherans on the fundamental truths of the doctrine of justification must take effect and be confirmed not just in the teaching of the Church but in people’s lives as well (no. 43).

We must never lose sight of the main point of the Pauline message. What the apostle wishes to affirm above all in Romans 3 is not that we are justified by *faith* but that we are justified by faith *in Christ*; we are not so much justified *by grace* as we are justified by the *grace of Christ*. Christ is the heart of the message, more so than grace and faith. Today he himself is the article by which the Church stands or falls: a person, not a doctrine.

We ought to rejoice because this is what is happening in the Church and to a greater extent than commonly realized. In recent months I was able to attend two conferences: one in Switzerland organized by Protestants with the participation of Catholics, and the other in Germany organized by Catholics with the participation of Protestants. The latter conference, which took place in Augsburg this past January, seemed to me truly to be a sign of the times. There were 6,000 Catholics and 2,000 Lutherans, the majority of whom were young, who had come from all over Germany. Its title was “Holy Fascination.” What fascinated that crowd was Jesus of Nazareth, made present and almost tangible by the Holy Spirit. Behind this effort was a community of lay people and a house of prayer (*Gebetshaus*), which has been active for years and is in full communion with the local Catholic church.

It was not an easy ecumenism. There was a very Catholic Mass with lots of incense celebrated once by me and once by the auxiliary bishop of Augsburg; on another day, the Lord’s Supper was celebrated by a Lutheran pastor with full respect for each other’s liturgies. Worship, teachings, music: it was an atmosphere that only young people today are able to create and that could serve as a model for some special event during World Youth Day.

I once asked those in charge if they wanted me to speak about Christian unity. They answered, “No. We prefer to live that unity instead of talking about it.” They were right. These are signs of the direction in which the Spirit—and with him Pope Francis—invite us to go.

Translated from Italian by Marsha Daigle Williamson