



# Jesus and Salvation: *A Lenten Reflection*

**The Episcopal Commission for Doctrine of the  
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops**

1. Does our world need to be saved from its present plight? Few would deny that our world is dislocated, fragmented, threatened with a global economic collapse, prone to systemic violence and a widening gap between those who have too much and those who have too little, in sum incapable of dealing with the most crucial issues before it. This disorder writ large reflects the inner disorder of human hearts and psyches.<sup>1</sup> Most people sincerely pursue the good as they see it for themselves and their loved ones. Many generously seek to allay the suffering of individuals and to achieve some changes in the structures of society, a few are ready for the persecution that will come when they struggle for full systemic change, and none are totally immune to the pervasive disorders of this world which find a beachhead in every human psyche. In St. Paul's terms, we are struggling with the powers and principalities, the rulers of the darkness of this world.<sup>2</sup> Our vaunted technological prowess is not an effective weapon in this struggle. We need a deeper conversion of hearts to take root among more and more people. Without this conversion there is no systemic change. In the words of a popular song, all we need is love, but love as a pleasant and ephemeral feeling will not do. Real love requires a wrenching transformation, a letting go of self that we cannot bring about by our own efforts but receive as a gift.<sup>3</sup>

## ■ The Two Dynamics

2. How do we find salvation? The contemporary media are constantly offering us ways of achieving it, whether persons to idolize, patterns of behaviour to adopt, organizations to support, or objects to purchase. We are constantly pulled in a number of directions, and this only adds to our helplessness. Most of these paths to salvation will offer us quick fixes that leave us dissatisfied, vulnerable to the next quick fix that flashes before our eyes. They promise and do not deliver. As we adopt these paths, we usually end up embedding violence, injustice and greed even more deeply into the world system that is already profoundly flawed. Our journey towards salvation is made all the more daunting.

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1 The term psyche, or soul, is used as the apostle Paul uses it. We are body, psyche, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5.23). Our spirit, or heart, as Paul often calls it, is at the very core of our human self. Our spirit is enfolded, and the world in which it is inserted affects us through sensory input with images, thoughts, and feelings. It is this latter realm which is known as *psyche*. Our hearts in the Pauline sense may well be turned to God, but our psyches will lag behind.

2 Ephesians 6.12

3 1 Corinthians 13.

3. The saviour that Christians propose to the world is Jesus Christ. Jesus in its Hebrew form means “God saves”. And he receives the name of Christ (in Hebrew *Messiah*) because he is anointed by God with the power to bring about what his name promises. But he will not achieve it without our collaboration: he works in and through us to bring about his kingdom, and invites us to join with him. Jesus proposes a way of salvation that can focus and galvanize all our efforts. The response to his invitation varies from person to person. Some fail to respond; others respond consciously because they have heard of Christ and choose to follow him, still others unconsciously because his spirit has touched them in mysterious ways. Some respond by their witness: they bear their sufferings as victims of this world with dignity and a sense of hope. Others respond by their action; they respond generously to the suffering they encounter and add suffering to their own lives; they speak out; they act in a counter-cultural way that puts them at real risk. Often they are marginalized by our predominant culture; in some cases they are martyred.

4. So two different dynamics are at work within our world and within our very selves. There is a blatant dynamic of disorder and illusion. In counterpart, there is a quiet and often unheralded dynamic of genuine and unstinting love. In different words these two dynamics are developed by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans: the disobedience of Adam leading to sin and death; the obedience of Christ leading to grace and eternal life.<sup>4</sup>

### ■ **Depth, Length, Height, and Breadth**

5. How Jesus saves us is a mystery beyond our comprehension. Let us enter into this mystery with prayerful reflection, ready to receive precious and life-giving insights. St. Paul will help us with the following text:

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.<sup>5</sup>

The words that will help us shape our reflection are: breadth, length, height, and depth. The text does not tell us what is broad and long and high and deep, but most scholars think that these nouns apply to the love of Christ, which is at work in the dynamic of salvation.

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4 Cf. especially Romans 5.

5 Ephesians 3.18-19.

6. Let us begin with depth. One of the characteristics of the dynamic of love is that it appeals to the inmost centre or depth of the person, often referred to as the heart. Superficial compliance based on threats or empty promises or other forms of manipulation can ensure desired patterns of behaviour for a time, but if the heart is not changed older patterns of disorder will recur sooner or later.<sup>6</sup> In saving us from the dynamic of sin God is less interested in staying the hand that brandishes the death-dealing weapon than in changing the heart that harbours the murderous thoughts.<sup>7</sup> In other words, God wants to give human beings a new heart and a new spirit.<sup>8</sup> He wants their turning away from the scandalous behaviour decried by the prophets to come from the depths, rather than be coerced and ephemeral.

7. The strategy of the dynamic of sinful disorder prevalent in our world is to by-pass the depth of all those it seeks to seduce. The point is to calculate rather than discern, manipulate rather than treat with respect, to use various techniques that prey on fear or greed or envy to bring about the desired patterns of behaviour; for example, buying a product or aligning oneself behind a political leader who is touted as the latest saviour of the country. The individual person is a pawn to be swayed in one direction or another, a tiny blip on a vast statistical array.

8. When Jesus came into the world, the chosen people were sorely oppressed. The times were out of joint, and something had to give. Those who encountered Jesus were expecting him to deal once and for all with these issues. They thought he would summon armies and lead them to victory against the Roman oppressors. He was to be their king and do their bidding. Jesus' concern was with something far deeper. Chase out the Romans and you might have respite from war and oppression for a short time. Before long, however, hostile camps would emerge within the chosen people, and there would be other adversaries from outside to contend with. No, the only real solution is the conversion of the human heart, and to bring this about was the objective of all of Jesus' encounters as recounted in the Gospels.

9. Depth requires length. One does not suddenly barge into the intimate spaces of another person and bring about a total upheaval of values and change of orientation. There has to be a careful preparation for one's appeal to be successful, a preparation which entails prayerful discernment, patience and persistence. One has to wait for the best moment, not too soon and not too late. By contrast, the dynamic of disorder abhors any kind of delay for reflection. It seeks the quick-fix, the instant gratification, the short-term solution. The antecedent preparation will be as brief as can be, and the subsequent results will be fleeting. Today's advertising campaign will be replaced by

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6 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae 109 8: without habitual grace sooner or later we will sin.

7 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae 107 1 ad 2.

8 Ezekiel 36.26.

tomorrow's, with different objectives and tactics. Quick fix is a persistent refrain of our world: "only five minutes for your fluffy pancakes to be ready"; "pick up your phone right now and have access to a whole new world of luxurious living"; "this special offer will expire very soon. Take advantage of it right now."

10. Length is part of God' plan of salvation, which took centuries to unfold. The quick fix would have been for God to send a saviour immediately after sin entered into the world. That would have been premature and superficial. No, God chose a people, made a covenant with them, and promised them a saviour. Gradually, over many centuries, God prepared them through painful experience distilled by the prophets to receive that saviour when the time was ripe (cf. Gal 4.4). Finally, Jesus of Nazareth came on the scene and presented himself as the long-expected Christ, anointed by God to bring salvation. He did not impose himself with splashy deeds that would lead to instant crowds of followers. He challenged those who gathered around him and many turned away from him. The prevalent quick fix bias had poisoned their expectation. But he persisted in his teaching and some eventually heeded his words and followed him with every fibre of their being. Salvation in depth requires great patience. Pope Francis makes the point vividly:

Flying a kite resembles the approach you need to take regarding a person's growth: sometimes you need to give them some slack because they are 'wavering.' In other words, it is necessary to give them time. We have to be able to set limits at the right moment, but other times we need to know how to look the other way and be like the father of the parable (the Prodigal Son) who lets his son move out and squander his fortune so that he learns from experience.<sup>9</sup>

11. God's approach is patient, allowing for human mistakes and resistance, waiting for the moment of maturation where the word spoken by his Messiah would fall into well-prepared ground and bear fruit. God did not want sin to enter into the world and to introduce a powerful dynamic to counter the dynamic of love. Out of respect for human freedom, however, God permitted this counter-dynamic because he could draw good out of it. Indeed, the disobedience of Adam is proclaimed as a "happy fault" (*felix culpa*) in the Easter Vigil preface. By its willingness to suffer the effects of sin love acquires unparalleled intensity, loses its naivete, is purified and solidly rooted. God is not interested in fly-by-night followers but in hearts that are transformed, and all the more transformed because their life experiences, especially that of being forgiven sinners, has deepened their yearning. In brief, depth and length go together.

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<sup>9</sup> From *Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio: His Life in His Own Words*, Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti (New York: Penguin, 2013). This quotation is also found at [www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1301525.htm](http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1301525.htm)

12. Height symbolizes the fact that the dynamic of love, based on God's grace and not on natural resources, leads people far above what they can imagine or desire. It seeks nothing less than the introduction of each human being into the intimate life of God, and a new heaven and a new earth which perfectly reflect the glory that flows from this intimacy. The goals of the dynamic of disorder are banal, pedestrian, unambitious, unable to really satisfy. Relieve one itch, and the next one will occur. Restlessness is the order of the day in this dynamic because the values that are artfully displayed before our eyes are sham values. Depth and height go together: depth has to do with the full healing of the human person and our world from its disorders; height has to do with the raising of human persons into intimacy with God. Unless we are willing to be raised to the heights, we will have no access to the depths, because we are created for God and only in relationship with God do we find our genuine human selves. That lofty destiny, which has already taken hold of us, is the best guarantee that we will find our authentic humanity. Only if we strive beyond ourselves will we find ourselves.

13. We see this in the ministry of Jesus. For him the secret to being authentically human is to enter into the mystery of God.<sup>10</sup> The synoptic Gospels show Jesus liberating people hurt by their own sins and victimized by those of others. He unshackles them, enables them to become themselves again, gives them a new lease on life. The Gospel of John lets us in on the secret power which makes this liberation possible. Jesus is able to bring us back to ourselves because he can bring us into intimacy with God. We are created by God and for God, and only in God do we find ourselves as authentic human beings. So we dwell in God and God dwells in us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In brief, depth and height go together.

14. Breadth brings in another essential dimension of the dynamic of salvation, which deals with persons, but with persons who create relationships with one another, and persons in relationship with one another who create community. Ultimately God's project of salvation leads to the Body of Christ in which all people, values, cultures, religions will be recapitulated and brought to a oneness in which all will be in all. This body is shaped by solidarity, by a circulation of the energy of shared love. The dynamic of sinful disorder isolates, closes individuals in on themselves, and the fulfillment they seek is only possible at the expense of someone else. The key-word of the dynamic of salvation is synergy and self-forgetfulness as one reaches out to others. The key-word of the dynamic of sin is self-gratification, self-reliance, self-reference. The effective pursuit of a common good becomes impossible, because it entails the risk of going beyond the boundaries of one's self. Competition replaces emulation, and we are caught up in a war of all against all.

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<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus put in well in the second century. "The glory of God is human beings fully alive, and the life of human beings is the vision of God."

15. A person transformed by the dynamic of love does not remain alone. From the transformed heart interpersonal relations emerge, and interpersonal relations coalesce into communities. The dynamic of love offers a universal solution for humankind, not the enhancement of the power or prosperity of a small group of people. This is what Christ's project of liberation is all about. The chosen people might have thought that Jesus was there to save them from others, but he was there to save every person without exception. Saving some and excluding others from salvation means that the state of war will recur. Christ's mission is about fostering reconciliation and forgiveness, not feeding the cycle of violence.

16. Jesus was a saviour through every step of his journey on earth, whether his Incarnation, his earthly ministry, or his Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Christian reflection throughout the ages affirms all of these steps, but often focuses on one or the other of them. The Eastern Church emphasizes the Incarnation and the seeds of divinization which it plants in human hearts – a theme especially present in the Gospel of John. Many churches of the third world are taken up with the counter-cultural ministry of Jesus, a ministry of word and example – a theme especially present in the synoptic gospels. The Church in the West has focused on the passage of Jesus through death to resurrection as providing the climax of the process of salvation, a theme especially developed in the Pauline writings. We have made St. Paul's thought our own and he will continue to guide us. We will focus on the Passion, Death, and Resurrection. A simple way of putting the question: how does the death of Jesus on the cross save us?

### ■ **The cross and the ultimate clash of sin and grace**

17. The cross provides a powerful image to anchor our thoughts. The vertical beam is planted into the ground (depth) and points towards heaven (height), and the horizontal beam bespeaks the breadth of Jesus' embrace of humanity. We move from space to time in the fourth dimension of length. The death of Jesus on the cross was not a quick fix, totally freeing us from our sins, without our having to do anything more towards our salvation. No: his death and resurrection do not force themselves upon humanity: we are invited to respond and up until the very end of time where salvation is definitive and total each member of the human race will still be engaged in the struggle with the dynamic of sin. Jesus did not die in our place such that we need do nothing else but passively accept our redemption. He died on our behalf such that we are henceforth to take up our own cross and follow him. God is infinitely powerful because he is infinitely patient, able to wait for us as we slowly open ourselves to his grace.

18. The cross of Christ is where the climactic clash of the dynamic of sin and the dynamic of grace takes place. The Easter Sequence tells us the result of this clash: "Death and life were locked together in a unique struggle. Life's captain died; now he reigns, never more to die." The price paid for this victorious reign of Christ, who is life's captain, was his suffering and death. Suffering and death play an equally integral role in our journey of salvation, which rescues us out of the realm of sin into that of grace.

19. The sin of Adam depicts for us the origins and nature of the dynamic of sinful disorder against which Jesus is engaged in an incessant struggle. In the account of Genesis, Adam was invited by God to accept his status as a creature by not reaching out for the fruit from the tree of good and evil, but he disobeyed. He chose to grasp this fruit thinking it would make him equal to God, rather than to receive intimacy with God as a gift. This original sin is at the source of the sin and death that inhabit the world. And it expresses the deep meaning of all sin, which is our turning away from God, our origin and our goal, the ultimate meaning of our lives.

20. God did not abandon us to this disorder which threatens to engulf us. He watched over Adam after his fall, and watches over us even while we are tasting the bitter fruits of our own wayward choices. Jesus is the key agent of God's providential care. Jesus comes to undo the effects of Adam's sinful act. He chooses to go to the very heart of the world's disorder and sin by doing the exact opposite of what Adam did. He has come to us as God made flesh. As God he was entitled to a form of human existence which called for recognition of his divine prerogatives, but he chose to empty himself out, taking the form of a slave, not giving up but letting go of these prerogatives, choosing total solidarity with humankind, undergoing, out of obedience to his Father's plan (Philippians 2.6-11), the death to which humans were condemned because of sin. This is the exact counterpart of the sin of Adam: Adam sought to grasp at the illusion of equality with God; by contrast Christ emptied himself of the genuine prerogatives to which he was entitled as God's equal. He chose to share the vulnerability of all human beings to the impact of evil in the world, and to be obedient unto death as a victim of sin, a fate he did not deserve. Thus he undid the sin of Adam in the most radical way possible.

21. The event of Jesus being put to death on the cross is the climax of both dynamics. It shows the dynamic of sin at its ugliest: the Author of life is reviled, condemned as a criminal, put to death. It also shows the dynamic of grace at its fullest: the Author of life in his human existence chooses total self-sacrifice, self-emptying, vulnerability and death. On the surface, the victorious actors in this drama are those who put Jesus to death: the dynamic of sin seems to prevail. Beneath the surface this evil dynamic sets up

the opportunity for Jesus to triumph by his willing and loving submission to his death as a victim on our behalf.<sup>11</sup> The last word is Jesus' self-gift.<sup>12</sup>

### ■ The why and the how of the cross

22. This account of the dynamic clash of Calvary leaves us with many unanswered questions. Struggling with them will help us enter more deeply into this mystery. St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that a sufficiently whole-hearted and intense act of love suffices to wipe out all sin and its effects.<sup>13</sup> If this is so, could God not have met the challenge of overcoming the dynamic of sin without permitting the death of his Son on the cross? And how does Jesus' death actually save us from sin? We will never plumb God's plan, but we can reflect on the fittingness of the way God actually chose for our salvation. In doing so we adopt the posture of the disciples of Emmaus, totally demoralized because their revered leader was put to death as a reviled criminal. Jesus walks along with them as a stranger, and he explains why this has to be so:

“Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. (Luke 24.25-27)

23. In reflecting on the why and the how of the cross we are continuing the conversation of Jesus with these disciples. Doubtlessly he drew from the Hebrew scriptures and connected many dots for them. We hope he will be with us and teach us and warm our hearts as we engage in our own reflections. We cannot demonstrate that the onerous path God actually chose was the only path possible, but we hope to grasp more fully that God's path is appropriate, fitting, and totally in harmony with everything we know about God and his ways.

24. We begin with broader questions which touch more on the why than on the how of the cross. Why would God have chosen to redeem us in this way? A traditional approach which continues to be very influential, is based on the thought of St. Anselm, bishop and theologian of the early Middle Ages. Like him, we assume from the outset God is both compassionate and just. As compassionate, God wants to redeem us and to bestow on us the beatitude for which he created us. But God's justice demands that

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11 As Aquinas puts it in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 22 a. 2 ad 2: without the persecution of the tyrant there is no patience of the martyr. God permits evil but draws a greater good from it.

12 A bare account of the outer events of the passion and death, an absolute travesty of justice which leads to horror and not to hope, fail to reveal this point. But those events receive their inner interpretation from the last supper that inaugurates them. During it Jesus offers his disciples his body and then his blood. Their separation point to his death, but note that his body is “given up for you” and his blood is “poured out for you”. This expresses the attitude of self-gift with which Jesus is about to go to his death, which the apostles understood only later.

13 *Summa contra Gentiles*, 3, 158.

proper satisfaction for our sin be made, and this led Christ to the cross. The one who achieved our salvation had to be both God, because no one else would be able to pay the price owing because of Adam's sin, and man, because humans are the ones who needed to pay the price. Anselm's thought is much more intricate than this, and invites us to a more contemporary reflection on God's attitude towards sin.

25. On one extreme, God is seen as wrathful and vindictive, in need of being placated. The transaction by which we are saved is quasi-mechanical: God takes his "anger" out on Jesus rather than on us. Jesus suffers in our place rather than on our behalf. The required quota of suffering is met, and Jesus dies.<sup>14</sup> We continue to be sinners through and through, but God overlooks our sin. Our personal involvement is minimal.

26. On the other extreme we have a more popular, "anything goes" or "easy does it" God adapted to contemporary tastes. This is the God of cheap forgiveness, who does not take our wayward freedom and its consequences seriously. A key failure of both extremes is that they do not sufficiently engage humans in their own turn from the dynamic of sin to that of grace.

27. Between these two extremes, like Anselm, we seek a healthy balance. God wants to forgive us, but also takes the reality of our sin with supreme seriousness. Sin has disruptive consequences, and the overcoming of those consequences involves conflict and suffering, that of Christ in first place, but also our own. And all of this is permeated by a love beyond all telling.

28. Indeed we must remind ourselves that the love Jesus demonstrates in his death is far from the pleasant feeling of easy and ephemeral infatuation which the dynamic of sin presents as love. St. Paul's hymn to love tells us what genuine love is all about. Christ is the supreme example of this kind of love, a tough love which resolutely faces evil head on rather than pretend it doesn't exist. It suffers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (cf. 1 Corinthians 13). This genuine love is tested, tempered, enhanced, revealed through endurance. This genuine love is indeed compassionate, far removed from vindictive wrath, but it is a tough love that takes seriously the consequences of sin.

29. But why does love need to go to the extreme of Christ dying on the cross? In any business relationship, the point is to get the task done with the minimum of fuss and bother. Eradicating sin, however, is not doing business but transforming persons. The point of Christ accepting undeserved suffering and dying for us while we were still sinners (cf. Romans 5.8) is to display love to its fullest extent. This is Christ's way of winning over our hearts and minds, giving us an example that will touch us deeply and

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<sup>14</sup> The mind-set that sees God as punitive and wrathful is reflected in the earlier Hebrew scriptures and strongly re-emerges in the late Middle ages confronted by devastating plagues. It has been adopted by some Christian fundamentalists. Many find it depicted in the recent film by Mel Gibson on the passion.

move us to assume the suffering involved in disentangling ourselves from the dynamic of sin. A purely formal and correct approach to redemption may win over our minds and wills. But our minds need to be won over too, and the lengths to which Jesus went in his redemptive act are designed to do just that.

30. Human learning, especially learning that engages the person in depth, involves not just concepts but also sensory input and imagination. Otherwise it remains purely head knowledge. To believe that God, through an inner act of love with minimal repercussion and visibility, has wiped away our sin would not have the same impact as to be confronted with the powerful evidence of God having gone to the ultimate point of totally sharing the fate which we deserve. Christ could have just given us an example, but he also empowers us to follow his example.

31. But then we may ask, how precisely does Christ's death bring about our salvation? St. Anselm has an answer crafted in the thought patterns of his age, but we will make use of the 20<sup>th</sup> century theology of death developed by Karl Rahner and Ladislaus Boros. By itself the biological fact of Jesus' death does not achieve our salvation. What counts is the personal commitment with which he went to his death. Indeed for humans – and Jesus was human in every way except for sin (cf. Hebrews 4.15) – death is the moment of truth which fully reveals their identity and the prevailing orientation of their lives towards or away from God. Jesus' death does just that: it shows him to be the Son unbreakably oriented to his Father, come into our world with a love able to totally absorb all injustice, violence, sin, and death. Death for Jesus is the release of the "Yes", the "Amen" which he is, the energy of divine love which inhabited him from the beginning. That release is the resurrection and the conquest of death once and for all. Henceforth he becomes for us both example (as human) and empowerment (as divine) in our struggle against the dynamic of sin. Because of Christ's death the path is open for us to eternal life.

### ■ Our share in the cross

32. What role do we play in our own redemption? We not only are but also need to be empowered by the love shown by Christ, because to move from the dynamic of sinful disorder to that of grace involves a wrenching struggle. That love might have converted the deepest part of ourselves, but for this conversion to permeate our spontaneous feelings and disordered attractions does not happen quickly and sometimes does not happen at all. For example, the reformed alcoholic might never take another drink, the reformed pornography viewer might never again visit enticing internet sites, but the yearning, the desire remains, and the struggle to overcome it is acute, and sometimes life-long. The slogan of St. Ignatius Loyola who bids us enter in the spiritual combat is *agere contra*: act against. And the more we willingly embrace the suffering and the struggle involved by setting ourselves right, the more likely will the new order of grace

flourish within us.<sup>15</sup> Indeed St. Paul sees our sufferings as we are being transformed by grace as a great act of giving birth, accompanied by groaning and labour pains.<sup>16</sup>

33. Suffering undergone unwillingly will not lead to a growth in grace. When accepted in a loving way in imitation of Christ it is transformative. But this does not mean that suffering once accepted ceases to be suffering.<sup>17</sup> Christ was willing to drink the chalice of suffering, but it still remains a chalice of suffering, as we see in his agony in the garden. Indeed, Christ offers the supreme example of how to accept suffering in love. Often in our case the sufferings we endure will initially evoke feelings of self-pity and anger, and make us even more concerned with our own small self, but in God's providence for each of us these feelings are to be gradually transformed into a loving acceptance of this suffering as deserved, worthwhile, to be incorporated into the great dynamic of grace that overcomes sin.

34. Two examples of this kind of transformation illustrate this point. If the purpose of incarceration is the vindictive imposition of suffering and unfreedom on those condemned, they will leave prison angry and eager to reoffend. Yes, the order of justice needs to be re-established, but the hope is that if they are treated with basic respect and genuine care for their rehabilitation their attitude and life patterns will gradually change, and they will reinsert themselves in society as productive citizens who will no longer offend.

35. One can also apply this principle to the suffering of purgatory. The essential dynamic of purgatory can be seen as the transformation of suffering. Once purgatorial suffering is totally embraced out of love, the period of purgation is over. Indeed for Aquinas an act of love sufficiently intense is enough to wipe out sin and all its effects.<sup>18</sup>

36. The forces of evil which Jesus overcame were not encamped within himself, because though he grew in wisdom and grace, he was sinless. He experienced the sting of the forces of evil which surrounded him and wanted him done away with. Being innocent and undeserving of what he was undergoing, he suffered all the more. And this is an invitation to us. Our own acceptance of painful struggle against evil within and without – a suffering we deserve – will have a measure of positive impact on the world around us, and in that way we share in the dynamic of grace. In his case the whole-heartedness of his undeserved suffering was enough to wipe out the sin of the whole world, to offer us not just an example to follow but also the power to follow it.

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15 The traditional way of saying this is "*aut poena aut satisfactio*", either penalty or satisfaction. Suffering is inevitable as the outcome of the dynamic of sin in which we are inserted. As long as we suffer unwillingly it is a penalty. If we accept suffering it becomes transformative, redemptive, all to God's satisfaction.

16 Romans 8.18-25.

17 My will may accept the need for an anxiety-fraught hour in the dentist's chair, but with every fibre of my psyche I want to be elsewhere.

18 See his seminal reflections in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 158.

37. Breadth is an integral part of the dynamic of grace. Grace overcomes our isolation from each other and inserts us in a profound circulation of love and life which makes us members of one another. When other humans suffer for our sake, on our behalf, we suffer with them, especially when we know that we deserve the suffering and they do not. St. Thomas Aquinas develops this point with reference to the union between friends:

Indeed the punishment that a friend suffers for oneself one regards as if it were suffered by oneself. Thus one does not escape punishment provided one suffer along with a suffering friend – and all the more so, the more one is the cause of his suffering.<sup>19</sup>

38. This applies to any two human beings, but above all to Christ and ourselves. The suffering of Jesus becomes our suffering because he suffers for us. In his suffering we are healed. A resonance, a solidarity in suffering is thereby established as a key element in the passage from the dynamic of sin to that of grace.

39. These reflections only scratch the surface of the mystery of our salvation. God's work of creation was very good, and so is his work of restoring his creation by countering the dynamic of sin which both marred it and opened the way for an even greater demonstration of love's power. The God who saves us in Jesus Christ does so with full engagement. God takes the time (length) and gives us the space needed for him to save us not superficially but in the depth of our being, to save us not in a mechanical and distant way but calling us to the unparalleled height of an unimaginably intimate relationship with him, to save us in breadth, not as isolated individuals but in a solidarity of love and suffering made possible by his Son who became one of us.

# Study Outline: Jesus and Salvation

## ***The Good News of Salvation***

- ▶ Our world is in disorder: this reflects the inner disorder within human beings.
- ▶ Our struggle is against evil.
- ▶ Until hearts change, the world cannot change.

## ***The Two Dynamics***

- ▶ The world's solutions to our helplessness are ineffective.
- ▶ Jesus offers salvation, but we have to accept it and cooperate.
- ▶ There are two dynamics at work in the world and in ourselves: one of disorder and illusion, and one of genuine love. These correspond to the disobedience of Adam (leading to death) and the obedience of Christ (leading to eternal life).

## ***Depth, Length, Height, and Breadth***

- ▶ How Jesus saves us is a mystery, so we will try to reflect on this using Eph 3.18-19. We will consider four dynamics: the depth, length, height, and breadth of Christ's love.
- ▶ *Depth*
  - Love appeals to the deepest part of a person; to the heart. In order to save people from sin, their hearts must be changed.
  - Our world wants to take the shallow path; to bypass the depths.
  - When Jesus came, he did not deal with the superficial problems (political, social problems) but came to bring conversion of human hearts.
- ▶ *Length*
  - Length is used here primarily in a temporal sense (a length of time). Time for preparation is necessary for conversion to occur.
  - Our world (the dynamic of disorder) disdains time for reflection and desires instantaneity and fleeting pleasures.
  - God's plan of salvation took a great length of time to unfold. It did not offer a quick fix. True salvation requires patience.
  - God allowed sin to enter the world to respect human freedom and because he knew he could bring good out of it.
  - God wants followers who are willing to remain, to suffer the effects of sin, followers who have the experience of being forgiven. Thus, depth and length go together.

▶ *Height*

- Height means that love, by grace, leads us above what we can humanly achieve. We are introduced into God's life, and God wants a new world that reflects this new relationship.
- The dynamic of disorder (the world) wants banality and that which cannot satisfy. This leads to restlessness.
- Depth goes with height: only when we are raised to the heights of intimacy with God do we find our true human selves (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22).
- Jesus liberates people by bringing them close to God.

▶ *Breadth*

- Breadth here refers to horizontality: God's plan of salvation reaches outwards and creates relationships between people (community).
- God wants to create the body of Christ, marked by solidarity and shared love.
- The dynamic of sinful disorder (world) wants to isolate, close individuals in on themselves, and make them egotistical.
- Christ's mission was not just to some people; he came to save all (universal). Saving only some would only incite violence.
- Jesus is Saviour through his whole life, but in the West we have often focused on Jesus' death and resurrection (emphasized by Paul), which we will do here. Question: How does the death of Jesus on the cross save us?

***The Cross and the Ultimate Clash of Sin and Grace***

- ▶ The vertical beam of the cross represents depth, pointing to heaven (height). The horizontal beam indicates breadth. Length is related to time.
- ▶ We are all invited to respond to Jesus' self-offering on the cross; to imitate him.
- ▶ The cross is where the great clash between the dynamic of sin (disorder) and the dynamic of love/grace takes place.
- ▶ The dynamic of sin is represented by Adam's sin: he refused to accept his identity as a creature but wanted to be God. All sin is a turning away from God.
- ▶ Jesus undid the effects of Adam's sin by doing the opposite of what Adam did: he was God, but he emptied and humbled himself in solidarity with us, even accepting death (a consequence of sin).
- ▶ The cross reveals the ugliest part of the dynamic of sin, and the most glorious part of the dynamic of grace.

### ***The Why and the How of the Cross***

- ▶ God could have wiped out our sin in other ways. So why the cross? This is a mystery, but we can reflect on how fitting it was that we should be redeemed in this way.
- ▶ Jesus told the disciples on the way to Emmaus that the scriptures say it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and be raised. We will, like Jesus, try now to show how the cross and resurrection was appropriate, fitting, and in harmony with God's character.
- ▶ St. Anselm says that the one who achieved our salvation had to be God (because no one else could pay the price for our sin) and man (because a man had to pay it).
  - It is not that God is angry and takes his anger out on Jesus. Nor is forgiveness "cheap" and God doesn't take sin seriously. Rather, God wants to forgive us but also to take the consequences of sin seriously.
- ▶ Jesus shows us true love in his death, which is more than the popular emotional idea of love (cf. 1 Cor 13).
- ▶ Christ's death on the cross displays love to its fullest extent; it is his way of winning over our hearts by giving us an example. The goal is to transform us as persons. He empowers us to follow his example.
- ▶ It is not just Christ's biological death that is salvific, but the fact that his death reveals his orientation towards the Father. His death is his great "yes" or "Amen."
- ▶ Christ is thus both example (as human) and empowerment (as divine) to overcome the dynamic of sin.

### ***Our Share in the Cross***

- ▶ We have a role to play in moving from the dynamic of sin to that of grace. We must engage in a constant struggle.
- ▶ When we accept suffering lovingly, in imitation of Christ, it becomes transformative.
- ▶ Examples of this kind of suffering:
  - Incarceration: goal is not just punishment, but rehabilitation, redemption
  - In purgatory, once the suffering is fully embraced out of love, it has accomplished its goal and is over.
- ▶ The evil that Jesus suffered did not come from within himself (he was sinless). Jesus' acceptance of suffering is not only an example to us (who deserve suffering), but also gives us power to embrace it.
- ▶ Grace unites us with others (breadth): when others suffer, we suffer with them. Likewise, Christ suffers for us, and heals us.

## **Conclusion**

- ▶ These reflections only scratch the surface.
- ▶ God gives us time and space (length) to respond to him. He saves us not superficially but in the depth of our being, calling us to the height of a relationship with him. He saves us in breadth, not as isolated individuals but in solidarity.

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