

The Positive Power Of Penance

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'Doing something positive'

The beginning of the season of Lent sees a host of good resolutions being made by many Catholics across the world. In our country it is accompanied fairly often by advice from the pulpit on what can and should be done in such resolutions. A common piece of advice that has been taken up by many priests and people is that "rather than give up things, we should do something positive". The idea of giving something up is increasingly seen to be a negative action. Real love, really positive spiritual actions are more about good deeds, positive actions. Lying behind this view is the belief that fasting and giving up things – what we often call making sacrifices – are somehow damaging, that they are not part of the Gospel of Christ and are part of a negative and sin-obsessed approach to life that is harmful.

This spirituality reveals itself not only at Lent; it has been pervasive throughout the Church. It can be seen in the New Age theologies spawned by Matthew Fox and others in America. It is even seen in some representations of what is called "Celtic spirituality". Such spiritualities have in common a tendency to identify God and creation in an almost panentheistic way, affirming the goodness of everything, but rejecting or reducing the significance of Original Sin. Original Sin is seen as a very negative doctrine cooked up by St Augustine because of his supposed pessimism about human nature and especially human sexuality. These spiritualities aim to liberate the Church from such repression and they connect self-denial with this unhealthy doctrine.

The scandal of the cross

Of course, the greatest stumbling block to this attitude is the Cross itself. It reveals the shallowness of this mock spirituality which frames everything in terms of an impoverished understanding of love. Ultimately this type of spirituality is unrealistic. It encourages an outlook on the world that refuses to recognise the woundedness and sinfulness that makes its painful impact on the reality of everyday human life. Often the critics of this present Pope espouse such a view, berating him for going against the spirit of openness to the world which they believe Vatican II proposed. However the Pope's analysis of the world has turned out to be more perceptive and more profound (and more in line with the Council) – and for this reason more full of hope, rather than girded with shallow optimism.

The world we live in is a world marked by sin. This is not to imagine that it is utterly corrupt or that matter is evil in itself. Indeed, in FAITH, we present a vision of creation as made for the coming of Jesus Christ: in Him the universe finds its true completion and consistency: "All things were created through Him and for Him...and in Him all things hold together" (Col 1:16,17). Evolution as a mechanism seems to point towards a goal: the harmony and balance that the universe evinces in its structure points towards God; but the advent of humanity

points to a fulfillment which will be material and spiritual, a fulfillment that Christ brings about in His coming. He comes to reveal, to lift up, to complete and to divinise.

However the reality of sin means that something has gone wrong. Since the origins of humanity there has been a tendency to selfishness, to turn away from what is good and true, to over-use and overdevelop our desires so that a lack of order seems to pervade our lives. This is something every human being appears to inherit: it is more than something we imitate in others and seems to arise from something within us. It is something that Jesus Himself recognised when He said, "What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man" (Mk 7:20-23). This doctrine is therefore more than just some invention of St Augustine. Ultimately it is just plain commonsense – the commonsense that made G. K. Chesterton say that Original Sin is as plain as a pikestaff.

Sin resists the work of Life

When Christ comes into the world He finds that there is a principle of resistance and rebellion to His work. He has come to bring life and life more abundantly (cf. Jn 10:10), yet the world through sin is poised towards selfishness and death. Indeed, death is always the great weapon of the devil and of sin because it is the devil's attempt to destroy the good completely – "he was a murderer from the beginning," says Jesus about Satan (Jn 8:44). Paul teaches the same when he says, "The end of those things (i.e. sin) is death. But now you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:21-23).

If Christ is to give us this gift of divine life, then He must overcome the dominion of sin and of death. This dominion is not some kind of spiritual atmosphere which hangs over humanity: it is something that roots itself within us. The remedy then must reach within our own being and begin the work of redemption, healing and sanctification from there outwards. Therefore the gift of sanctification is more than just some veil that is draped over our humanity: it is something that effects a transformation and renewal even of our mind (cf. Rom 12:1-2). Without such a work being accomplished Christ cannot reign over all things – and so the work of creation itself will be frustrated.

It is here that the mystery of the Cross begins to show itself most beautifully. The view of the Incarnation which we present in FAITH – called the Scotist view – where Christ is predestined from all eternity to come into this world, is sometimes accused of making the Cross a kind of afterthought and incidental to God's plan. But once we see that in a world marked by sin God's plan for mankind could not be fulfilled without the Cross, then the Cross in fact becomes more central, not

less. God loved the world so much that He sent His only Son. The Cross is a sign of how much further God is prepared to go in this extraordinary love He has for us. The Cross is a further demonstration of God's love, a love that is prepared to endure to the very end, through the horror of death itself, sin's last and most terrible weapon.

The hour of darkness

In the mystery of His passion and death, Jesus experiences all the fury and hatred that sin attempts to throw at Him. In the Garden of Gethsemane He experiences and sees the sin of every human being, the suffering that all have had to endure as a result, the blighted hopes and agonized lives of so many souls. He experiences betrayal and denial by His closest of friends; He is harangued, unjustly tried and beaten; He is tortured and abused violently; He is condemned by the most cynical of deals between the Sanhedrin and Pilate; He carries His cross amidst crowds that shout and accuse and weep; He is nailed to the cross and jeered at as someone utterly abandoned by God, a fraud; He experiences a most terrible agony of physical pain and spiritual darkness. All of this He suffered for us. He offered it all so as to make reparation for us. He shows a perfect love of His Father – “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” – and a perfect love of sinful humanity – “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” In this perfect love He as man bridges the terrible gap that sin had opened up between man and God. He Himself becomes the new ladder between heaven and earth that Jacob foresaw in his dream (Gen 28:10-19) and Jesus promised to His disciples (Jn 1:50-51).

The offering of love

He suffers and pleads for and with each of us from Gethsemane and from the Cross. It is here that Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus seems to be so important: through it we can comfort the Lord in Gethsemane. Indeed we know he was comforted there by an angel (Lk 22:44). Could the angel be carrying Him the prayers, love and reparation of the saints just as the angel carries their prayers in the Book of Revelation (cf. Rev 8:3-4)? This union with Jesus in His suffering is something that has marked the life of Christians from the very beginning. We see it in St Paul – “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20). Paul wishes to “share His sufferings, to become like Him in His death”, so as to share in His resurrection (Phil 3:10). This is far more profound than anything that facile creation spiritualities have to offer.

A love stronger than death

On the Cross then Christ reveals the fullness of His love for us and His Father. Yet if the story had ended there it would have appeared that death had had the last word. After all, sin so hates God that it wishes to remove Him from the heart of the world, something that is a leitmotif of human history. “Crucify Him,” is not just a Jewish cry but the rebellion that is found in every human heart. Is the perfect love of Christ even stronger than death? The Resurrection shows that it

is. The love of Christ is so alive in Him that it is in fact more than just a feeling or a desire. It is His Living Divine Person in action. That is why St John is able to say, "God is love" (1Jn 4:8). Jesus is the model for all love because He is love itself in action – or rather, who and what He is, is what love is. This theme is repeated by John and Paul in their writings. It is not that we have some concept of love that we apply to God; rather the concept of love is redefined totally by looking at who Jesus is and what He has done for us. He sacrificed Himself totally for the Church to make her holy, to sanctify and cleanse her (cf. Eph 5:25-26). "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10). In His death and Resurrection Jesus reveals that God is love: God is the one who gives Himself most of all to us and for us freely and totally.

Death cannot overcome this. Instead it is swallowed up by life – the infinite, holy life that is God. But this infinite holy life and love is now forever displayed and revealed in a man. It is no longer apart from the world. Rather, through this man Jesus Christ it is crystallized and made available to every person. In His humanity, Jesus becomes the living medicine and remedy for sinful mankind. His humanity was afflicted by all that sin could fling at it. But it has triumphed and lives now with a life more fully alive than anything we experience now.

Redemption is by union with Christ

Just as Christ was always to be the Model and Mediator of life for humanity, so through His death and resurrection He becomes even more so in a sinful world. The key is to have union with Him. Only with Christ alive within us can He reach into our depths and bring us the healing and new life that we need. This is why baptism is so fundamental. Jesus gave it to us as the normal means by which His resurrected life (which is nothing less than His active presence through the Holy Spirit) can become a reality within us – and so we be redeemed.

However the damage of sin runs deep and the wound of sin produces a tendency towards itself (called concupiscence). This is a life-long reality. As a result it will require a life-long struggle. It is here most of all that the simplistic spiritualities mentioned at the beginning of this editorial show themselves to be a menace. They so often emphasise the resurrection that the Cross seems to lose its blunt reality. However, for a Christian the new truth of his life is that he is to be united to Christ and follow Him. This means that in our world of sin, and in our own personal world of sin, there can be no Easter without Good Friday. The joy of the Resurrection only comes about through the Cross. This is not to diminish the full joy of Easter. It is rather to be deeply realistic about sin in our lives; and, in fact, such a view will make the joy of Easter more real. However it will not shy away from saying that the mystery of suffering is fundamental to the Christian life. Christ calls us to take up our cross every day (Luke 9:23).

Yet the Christian life is not some kind of brutish boot camp that must be endured whatever happens. Christ on the Cross reveals that the mystery of His suffering

is nothing less than the mystery of His love. Whereas sin had cast suffering and death as merely negative things, Christ transforms them and show us that it is possible to fill them with love and so make them realities suffused with hope. This is a strange message in a world where the pursuit of pleasure and of personal happiness is seen as the only meaning to life. Once again the Cross speaks most eloquently in its mystery of love, but its eloquence seems to baffle the minds and hearts of our contemporaries. It is this contemporary view of life which seems to have tainted certain modern spiritualities. It is ultimately a sad view for it offers no ultimate hope. Suffering is part of life and the world can only react to it with fear, horror and bewilderment.

The Cross as the paradoxical symbol of Life

This is why the Cross is ultimately so profoundly pro-life. It says that every life can have a meaning and a value, irrespective of its size or condition. It declares that suffering is not the worst thing that can happen to us – rather a life lived without faith is far more terrifying and empty. Our world is rightly diagnosed by Pope John Paul as afflicted by a culture of death. The reason for this is that although our culture proclaims a thorough-going love of this life as the only life to be lived, it is at heart filled with despair. After all, every moment that passes becomes solely a memory of what was once had and which can never return again. The sheer pursuit of pleasure is foiled by the reality of ageing and death which begins to limit all that is possible and all that can be enjoyed. The full life of the world is found time and again to be very hollow.

The value of suffering

In Christ all this changes. Christ crucified is the sign that all suffering can find a meaning and purpose if it is joined to His love. All suffering can become redemptive for ourselves and for the world. My life need no longer be closed off by the goal to live it for my happiness alone. Christ frees me from such pitiful isolation and opens my life up so that I can live for others and with others in generous service. And even if I cannot do as much as others can, even if I am limited by physical or mental incapacity, the offering and living of that incapacity in union with Jesus means that I am still of use: my value and dignity is measured not by activity but by love and by who I am.

It is here that we can see too that fasting and giving up things in Lent is not a negative thing but something truly positive. If it is joined to Christ in Gethsemane and Christ on the Cross, it becomes an instrument of a love that heals and redeems. That is why Paul writes to Timothy, “I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which in Christ Jesus goes with eternal glory” (2 Tim 2:10).

'Giving up' and 'offering up'

Such fasting also has another value. It is a kind of training. If our primary motive is to love God more, fasting can give us greater strength to resist temptation and avoid sin. This is because when we fast from something that we truly desire –

whether it be food or drink, or television or sleep – we are showing that our love for God is greater than our desire for these things. They are not in control of us and they are not our masters: Christ is the true Master and Lord of our lives. As a result this training is double-edged: it gives us greater self-control and it also becomes an act of more generous love towards God. This is because the Cross is always an act of self-sacrificial love that leads to new life and deeper commitment. At the heart of every Christian life this is the dynamic, the pattern that should be operative. It is already present there through Baptism because we have imprinted within our spiritual identities the crucified and risen Lord.

Once we see the centrality of the mystery of the Cross to Christian life certain developments in the devotional life of the Church can be seen to be impoverishments. For example, many churches have replaced their crucifix with the image of the Risen Lord. The image in itself is good and wonderful – though it rarely captures the splendour of the risen life that Christ has gained for us as, say, icons do. The real problem though is that the image of the crucified Lord on His cross has disappeared. The crucifix recalls the teaching of St. Paul: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24). The removal of the crucifix seems to be in line with the superficial spirituality that has made advances in the life of the Church.

The crucifix is the Tree of Life

At its worst such spirituality is not Christian precisely because it cannot bring itself to face the full reality of the Cross. Removing the crucifix from churches only seems to emphasise a distaste for the Cross which appears very modern but which, as St Paul’s letters reveal, is in fact very old. Furthermore, despite its claims at times to be based on creation spirituality, it really reduces the true splendour of creation, a splendour that we seek to present in FAITH. An emphasis on the Cross ultimately points to a creation that was made good by God and which is capable of being redeemed and renewed

At every turn, therefore, the Cross proves that it is something positive: it speaks more of life than of death. All of us in the Church could do well to rediscover the centrality of the Cross. Many of the problems that afflict the Church today are in part linked to a lack of engagement with the Cross. Once presented in the perspective offered here, the true Wisdom of the Cross begins to make a claim on our hearts and minds, and it is this full Wisdom of Christ – the Heir of Creation who comes to reclaim His own – that the Church needs to rediscover. Only then will we grasp more fully the height and the depth of how the tree of death truly has become for us – through Christ – the Tree of Life.