

## Receiving the Cross of Christ

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There are only two spiritual states with regard to the Cross of Christ: knowledge of it, and ignorance of it.

One need not know the Cross of Christ specifically to have knowledge of it. If one has never heard of Jesus or has never seriously considered Jesus because of inadequate presentation or the pressure of social factors, such as anti-Christian prejudice, one can still benefit from the Cross of Christ by knowledge of its fruits: the experience of the presence of the Loving God, knowledge or intuition of the forgiveness of sin that results in freedom and joy of spirit, and effective love of others—love that transforms the lives of others so that they experience, even simply intuitively, the loving presence of God in their own lives.

If one *does* know the Cross of Christ, then one understands it as the sacrament of our salvation. It is both sign and effective action. It is the permanent and universal exhibition of God's love for all human beings, that the God who is the Source of All That Is, who is incomprehensible power and the ocean of love in which all creation is immersed, should humble himself to come among us as a human being and suffer human death in a most agonizing and undignified way: nailed naked to a tree beside a public road, as a common criminal, to be mocked and scorned by strangers passing by, even by his own Jewish people. In doing this, his meaning is, "See how much I love you." This love, of course, extends to all people, even to those who betrayed him to the civil and religious authorities.

But the Cross of Christ is more than merely a sign of love. It is simultaneously an effective act of liberation. Jesus tells us repeatedly that he will die for the forgiveness of the sins of all humankind. The Christian scriptures and the Jewish prophets who foretell the salvation by Christ say that the Cross forgives sins, that we are "redeemed" and "ransomed" from sin by the Cross of Christ.

What does this mean? How does the death of one man—even the God/man himself—bring about forgiveness of the rupture of the loving relationship of each human being with God? Surely, God in his love never holds sin against us; rather, he always immediately forgives us in his heart. By forgiving us, he frees us (and himself) from the sorrow of shattered love immediately and without any indication of repentance on our part. Otherwise, the God of Love would be contorted by grudges. Under these circumstances, then, how does the Cross forgive sins that have already and immediately been forgiven?

The Christian scriptures treat the Cross from the perspective of Jewish sacrifice, in accordance with the Torah. Some sacrifices in the Law were "sin offerings"—offering to God the best that the sinner had, in terms of perfect livestock and grain, as a way of inviting God's forgiveness. But such substitutionary sacrifices—the goods substituting for the life itself of the sinner—are merely symbolic and thus not a necessary or effective component of the act of forgiveness. Sacrifice is an arbitrary invention of God's in the Law; it is not a *necessary* part of the process of forgiveness, which is this: the injured or aggrieved party willingly accepts the loss that he sustained and in spite of the loss, he offers a restored relationship of love to the perpetrator. This process of forgiveness is not triggered by an external act, such as a ritual sacrifice. Rather, the process of forgiveness is a thoroughly interior process, springing from the love embedded in the heart of the injured party.

This cannot be, then, an adequate explanation of the effectiveness of the Cross.

An effective approach may be offered by beginning not with the sinner, but with the Law itself. The purpose of the Torah, in the first place, is to be the foundation of the communal life of love and peace. The Jewish community—and all humankind—will find joy and peace if they humbly recognize God as the source of their blessings—and give him worship—and if they humbly treat one another with justice, giving each person his or her due willingly and in service of their human dignity.

Sin interrupts and makes impossible this social harmony. When one offends this law, one engages in evil—in the rejection not only of the Law but also of God, the Source of the Law. We say that the sinner allows himself to be seduced by the “glamor of evil.” The sinner prefers the personal advantages of violating the Law and dismissing the Law Giver, to promoting social harmony based in justice. Sin removes the sinner’s dedication and interest from God himself to the advantageous but selfish, and ultimately destructive, sinful situation. As a result, the sinner leaves his relationship with the loving God and enters his own self-centered world. This selfish world, absent from the spiritual life bestowed by God, the Source of Life, is the world of spiritual death. We all know this world of death from our personal experience, for, as St. Paul says, “all have sinned.”

This world of death is the second spiritual state referred to at the beginning of this essay. This yawning cave of death opens into despair, a quiet, harsh, joyless place in the center of our beings, a “black hole” of selfishness that devours everything and gives nothing. When we are in this state, we are powerless to remove ourselves from it. So we attempt to fill this hole with the distractions offered by our environment: pleasure, power, lust, gluttony, cruelty, wealth, hypocritical goodness, lies and deceit, slander and plots, combative behavior, and so on.

In Salvation History—and in our own lives as well—the Cross of Christ hovers above this other world of shame and selfishness and spiritual death. Love pours out over the world of death. The love is feared and rejected by the inhabitants of that world. (As Scott Hahn has suggested, this is the nature of hell.)

By entering physical death, the God/man seemed to have been vanquished. Death won by taking the God/man hostage, just like every other human being. Jesus, because of the Cross, was subjected to death—made subject to it. But this could not, and did not, last. Jesus is God, the source of limitless life. And so, his inextinguishable life prevailed over the imprisonment of death. He broke the chains of death and became alive again. He “rose from the dead” and lived on earth among his followers for an indeterminate time afterwards.

How, then, did Jesus “redeem” and “ransom” us? These words referred in the first century to buying the release of prisoners of war from their captors. But in the act of salvation, there was no captor who was able to hold his prisoners, nor was there any exchange of valuables. Rather, the one who died—Jesus—asserted life over death and “destroyed death,” as St. Paul says.

That is, there are two ways to redeem someone taken prisoner by the enemy. The first way is to pay the enemy’s asking price in exchange for the prisoner. The second way to earn the prisoner’s release is to kill and thus vanquish the captor. This liberates the whole group of captives. Jesus liberated us by doing the latter: he destroyed death. In this way he freed us from the gaping despair of sin and returned us into union with the Father—restored us to salvation.

So the Cross of Christ is the necessary preliminary to the actual liberating action—the Resurrection of Christ—the assertion of life, overpowering death.

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