



Parousial Aspects of Christian Life

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The Church's exultant celebration of Christ's resurrection is the greatest Feast of the liturgical year. The texts of the liturgy for all of Easter week—but especially for the Easter Vigil—place careful and deliberate stress on two facets of the Paschal mystery: the resur-

rection of Christ and baptism. During the Vigil Mass, the priest addresses the assembled faithful with these words:

In this most sacred night, dear brethren, holy Mother Church recalls the death and burial of our Lord Jesus Christ. In return for His great love, she keeps watch. And celebrating His glorious resurrection, she is filled with an exceeding joy.

But, as the Apostle teaches, by baptism we have been buried with Christ into death. As Christ has risen from the dead, so we too must walk now in newness of life.

The liturgy is teaching us here that there is a close link between the Christian people and Christ's glorious resurrection from the dead. Christ's resurrection first touches us in baptism. In this sacrament, we die to sin and are buried with Christ. We then rise with Him to a new life. We are made members of His Mystical Body, the Church, and we take our place within the Christian community as full members. All of this takes place under sacred signs—in mystery.

We said that in baptism we are *first* brought into contact with Christ's resurrection. This first baptismal contact is meant to grow deeper, to become more "actual," as it were, in the Eucharist, for baptism is also a sacrament of initiation. Once baptized, the Christian takes his place within the assembly, the worshiping community, where he is united with his fellow Christians in a common worship of the Father and a love of Jesus Christ. Here, around the altar, he "proclaims the death of the Lord, until he come." (I Cor. 11:26) In this act whereby the Christian actualizes his baptismal status as a member of God's people, he receives a living, dynamic, *risen* Christ. In the Eucharist, it is no sort of motionless Christ who is received, but the Bread of Life—the Body of the *risen* Lord.

The Eucharist is also a *food*, and as such gives us strength for our journey. Saint Thomas went so far as to define the Eucharist as the food of the wayfarer. (1) By looking at the Eucharist as food for the wayfarer we can see the sacrament's eschatological dimension. The *Constitution on the Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council explains this eschatological dimension:

In this earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. . . . We eagerly await the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, until He, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with Him in glory. (2)

“The holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims.” This phrase brings to mind our final contact with the resurrection of Christ—that final link between Jesus’ resurrection and us, which we will experience in our own bodily resurrection.

In baptism we rise to a new life in Christ. In the Eucharistic celebration we become one with the *risen* Body of the Lord. At the Second Coming we will share more intimately still in the mystery of the Lord’s resurrection. Our ultimate solidarity with Christ will come about *only* at the *parousia*.

Is such a vision of the Christian life, stretching as it does from baptism to the Second Coming, really justified? Isn’t the important thing the task of saving our *souls*? It hardly seems important to bring the resurrection of the body into the picture. Our final resurrection, it would seem, is really little more than a superfluous extra. The really important thing is “saving one’s soul.”

Such an outlook is really quite common, although at heart it is very far from the biblical way of looking at things. In fact, it is really not a very Christian point of view. But precisely because this *is* such a common outlook, we shall dwell at length on this last contact of the Christian with the resurrection of Christ—at the *parousia*-resurrection.

Let us begin by trying to gain a fuller understanding of Christ’s resurrection as the Scriptures present it to us.

Christ’s passion, death and resurrection were for St. Paul all part of the *one* mystery of redemption. By His death, Christ atoned for man’s sins; He made satisfaction for man’s rejection of God. By undergoing true human death, Christ manifested His genuine solidarity with mankind, for it is under the sign of death that man most characteristically lives. As Father Rahner has put it:

Thus he took death upon Himself, which in the concrete order expresses and manifests the creation which fell in angels and men. . . . The very obscurity of Christ’s death expresses and embodies His loving obedience, the free dedication of His whole created being to God. (3)

This self-offering of Christ made to the Father on man’s behalf was accepted by the Father. The testimony, the sign, of this acceptance is the resurrection. The resurrection is also a sign of Christ’s own victory over death—the penalty for and sign of sin. And so in overcoming death, Christ also overcame sin. In this salvation-process it

is important for us to emphasize the intimate solidarity of Christ with mankind, for without an appreciation of this close link we cannot appreciate how His resurrection affects us.

In speaking of Jesus' resurrection there is another extreme to be avoided. We must be careful not to see His resurrection simply as a "reward" given to Christ for His sacrifice on our behalf: *because* Christ did this, the *reward* was given. This would be an inadequate explanation. Rather, the bond between His death and His resurrection in the work of our redemption is one of intrinsic causality.

Thus, with His passion, Christ's resurrection constitutes one single objective act of redemption. Christ, we have said, took upon Himself the human condition (except, of course, for sin), and in a free act of sacrificial self-offering, He gave Himself into the hands of His Father. As Père Lyonnet has expressed it, this act of self-oblation "flowered forth" into His resurrection. (4)

We have, then, two factors: (a) Christ's intimate *solidarity* with mankind in His saving action, and (b) the *unity* of His death and resurrection in this saving action. Now we must explore the implications involved here.

Redemption comes to us when the divine act (which affects us through its embodiment in Christ and His work) effects in us a transition from death to life. This transition from death to life is not achieved all at once. Let us try to see this "salvation-*process*" in the light of Saint Paul's teaching.

For Saint Paul, man was a psychosomatic unity. The body-soul dichotomy of Plato was foreign to his Semitic mentality. We do find an opposition between *sarx* (flesh) and *pneuma* (spirit), but not in a dualistic body-soul sense. "Spirit" means, for the Semite, "man"—the whole man, under the influence and activity of the Spirit. "Flesh" was the whole man, too, but in his frailty and mortality. Body (*soma*) for the Hebrew meant the whole man in his concrete reality as a living breathing *person*. In becoming "flesh," then, Christ became a weak, "sinful" creature. And through His resurrection He gives us—even now—a share in His pneumatic glory. "You were buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also *raised* with Him through faith." (Col. 2:12) But our incorporation into Christ does not remove the need for a resurrection at the *parousia*. At baptism, man *begins* to put *sarx* to death. Only at the *parousia*-resurrection will this process of "putting off the old man" be brought to perfec-

tion. This process of "putting Him on" is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 8:11) Père Feuillet has summed up Paul's perspective this way:

Paul is interested above all in two crucial moments of our participation in the risen life of Christ: baptism which inaugurates this sharing and the *parousia* which consummates it. Baptism makes us one with Christ in His death and resurrection; the glorious *parousia* places the final seal on our conformity to Him. All that takes place between these two moments does not establish any really new relation to Jesus. (5)

We have briefly sketched Paul's perspective. Should we conclude that he was indifferent to death and to the consequences of death for those who died before the *parousia*? Not at all. Yet it remains true to say that death and its immediate aftermath were not his principal concern. He wrote of death twice, and each time with an awareness that it is a blessing. In Philippians 1:21-23, we read:

For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if to live in the flesh is my lot, this means for me fruitful labor, and I do not know which to choose. Indeed I am hard pressed from both sides—desiring to depart and to be with Christ, a lot by far the better; yet to stay on in the flesh is necessary for your sake.

And in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter five:

And indeed, in this present state we groan, yearning to be clothed over with that dwelling of ours which is from heaven, if indeed we shall be found clothed and not naked. For we who are in this tent sigh under our burden, because we do not wish to be unclothed, but rather clothed over, that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (vv. 2-4)

Always full of courage, then, and knowing that while we are in the body we are exiled from the Lord (v. 6), . . . we even have the courage to prefer to be exiled from the body and to be at home with the Lord. (v. 8)

Paul must make a choice between death and life—not a choice, we might note, between life and the *parousia* (his choice in that case would have been easy for him). Death fills him with horror at first. We see the full extent of his fear in the text from Second Corinthians. He frankly admits that it requires *courage* "to be unclothed." Still, he has the courage "to depart and to be with Christ." He chooses death not because it will mark the entry into a *new* solidarity with Christ (only the *parousia* can do that; death cannot bring full life to the *whole* man, and Paul knows that), but because it marks the

end of the old solidarity with *sarx*. And yet he does look forward to some sort of rich and happy encounter with Christ after death, and even before the *parousia*, i.e., "to be at home with the Lord." But the *parousia* is always the important thing. Second Corinthians 5:1-10 begins with a mention of resurrection and ends with a reminder of judgment. The immediate aftermath of death is seen as a prelude to final reunion with the body. Father Barnabas Ahern writes:

Paul has sketched his scale of values. No matter what death may achieve in intensifying life with the Lord, it cannot match the full and rich consummation of the *parousia*.



The early Church also had a keen appreciation of the centrality of the *parousia*-event when speaking of the Christian's destiny. We read, for example, this in Origen:

When the resurrection of the real, whole body of Christ comes, then the members of Christ will be knitted together, joint by joint, each one in his place, and the members will form at last, completely and in full reality, one single body. (7)

We can summarize what we have said so far. Christ died and rose again, and we are *in Christo*—members of His Mystical Body. By the power of His resurrection we, too, shall rise to form the tri-

umphant *Christus resurgens*. The whole spectrum is now in focus: Christ the Lord rose from the dead, He ascended to His Father, and now reigns as the Head of His Mystical Body. Through the power of His glorified humanity, He raises men to a new life (a spiritual resurrection at baptism), and at the end of time, when He returns again, He will raise both sinners and saints, but the saints will be joined to Him for all time, entering into final solidarity with Him. Before that day, the cosmic saving plan of God remains incomplete (though not "undecided," we might add).

What are the implications of this deepened appreciation of resurrection-theology in our Christian lives? When we confess our belief in the resurrection of the body at the Creed of the Mass—"And I await the resurrection of the dead"—what is the object of this hope? In what precisely do we believe?

Let it be said first of all that our hope reaches *further* than to a hope that our *souls* will be united to Christ in heaven. Christ came to save men, not merely the souls of men. Father Gleason has put it this way:

Christ redeemed only what He assumed, and if He did not assume a body, then our body is doomed to everlasting corruption and death, to return to the elements from which it was made. (8)

But Christ *did* assume a body; He *did* become flesh, and is eternally "a piece of this world." (9) For this reason the whole created world has been elevated to a new mode of being, a new order of salvation. This new order will come to final perfection only in the *eschaton*. Christ's final victory over the world will be achieved only at the *parousia*, when there will be a "new heaven and a new earth." Every Christian is even now a part of this new order; he is inexorably bound up with the whole plan of salvation. Christ conquered sin and death by the Cross, and His resurrection makes ours possible. Leave out the final resurrection, and you are left with a distorted picture of salvation, just as distorted as if you had left out *Christ's* resurrection from His redeeming action. For Saint Paul, the *fullness* of our sonship waits upon the resurrection of the body. (Rom. 8:18) But even here and now our bodies share in the redemption brought by Christ. Romano Guardini writes:

Christianity is not a metaphysics; it is the witness to Himself of the true God. It is the proclamation that God has seized upon earthly

existence and will carry it on to a new state in which nothing of the old is lost but rather will receive its ultimate meaning. All of this is bound up with the body. (10)

Any view of Christianity which sees the final resurrection as less than the completion of the history of salvation, for the individual and for the whole people of God, cannot be said to be a fully Christian vision. Any view of Christianity which sees our beatitude as perfectly complete before the final resurrection is unbiblical. The resurrection of the body alone will bring that fullness of life with God which only the *whole man* can experience. Life hereafter is not a substitute for a full life here, but rather is the fulfillment and completion of it. And this necessarily involves the body. The later faith-consciousness of the Church has shed light upon the "interim state," before the final resurrection but after death. Yet we know that this teaching does not conflict with the clear perspective toward the *parousia* which we find in Saint Paul.

The vision of Saint Paul, and of the early Church, has *always* been the true vision of the Church. It must be our vision, too. Only the *parousia* will bring our final incorporation into Christ. Before then the cosmic saving plan of God is incomplete. This is why "I wait the resurrection of the dead."

NOTES

1. Cf. Saint Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, III, 73, 4.
2. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council, Chap. 1, Section 1, no. 8.
3. Karl Rahner, S.J. and Herbert Vorgrimler, S.J., *Theological Dictionary* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), p. 118.
4. Quoted in Barnabas M. Ahern's *New Horizons* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, 1965 ed.), p. 88. No reference to the original work is given.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
7. Origen, *In Joan.*, t. 10, c. 36.
8. Robert W. Gleason, S.J., *The World To Come* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), p. 139.
9. Karl Rahner, S.J., *Theological Investigations* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1963), Vol. I, p. 222.
10. Romano Guardini, *The Last Things* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), p. 60.