

The Cross of Christ

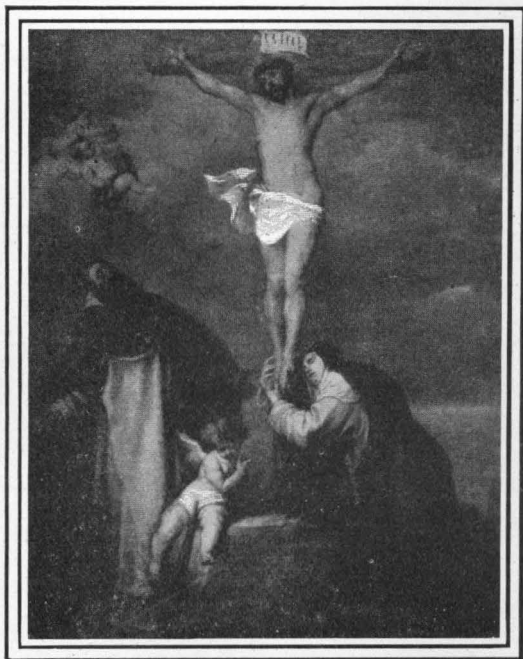
By BRO. FERRER CASSIDY, O. P.

THE cross is prominent now. A few days ago a cross of dry ashes was printed on our foreheads; all during Lent the cross will be preached from the pulpit, and will be followed in the fourteen Stations. On Passion Sunday it will become still more vivid in our imagination because a veil will hide it from our sight. On Good Friday Holy Church, distressed with grief, actually turns her sorrowing soul more earnestly toward the cross than to the Mass; her grief does not darken her reason—she understands that this day must be dedicated to the cross, for it was on this day that she sprang forth from the open side of Him Who hung on the cross. True, her voice is shaking when she narrates the seeming victory of perfidious Israel over her Spouse when they nailed Him to the cross, but the bitter story ends with a glorious, victorious cry that the triumph finally goes to the cross: "Above all the trees of cedar, thou only art most high, thou, on which hung the Life of the world, on which Christ triumphed, and death vanquished death forever!" After that every one of her holy edifices is turned into an unadorned monstrance to display this cross of Christ.

The visible world delightful to the eye; the stars of heaven, the mountains of earth, the trees, flowers, the sea, the sky, are a picture-book in which to read God's glory, for all these things are imitations of divine beauty. This truth strikes us one way or another almost every day. But God works in a similar way in the world of grace, which was founded by the cross; and therefore St. Augustine says in a similar strain concerning the cross: "The tree upon which were fixed the members of Him dying, was even the chair of the Master teaching!"¹ God teaches man something in each detail of the life and death of Christ, just

¹ Tr. 119 in Joan.

as each tiny detail in the works of nature reveals something of the Artist hand that fashioned the world. The Fathers of the Church meditated long over the meaning of the cross; St. Thomas Aquinas gathered together some of their vigorous sentences; let us put this question to him, remembering that



"Crucifixus est pro Nobis"

Christ from a cross praised him for his writings: "Why was it that God chose a cross to die on, and not some other mode of death?"

"Now there are some men who although they do not fear death in itself, are yet troubled over the manner of their death. In order then, that no kind of death should trouble an upright man, the cross of this Man had to be set before him, because among all kinds of death, none was more execrable, more fear-inspiring than this."² To die on the cross was as disgraceful to

² S. Aug. lib. 83 QQ. quaest. 25.

the spirit as it was agonizing to the body. The ancient world held up its hands in horror and gasped at the mention of the cross. And this kind of death the Lord of all deliberately selected, and foretold as His choice centuries before: "Let us condemn Him to a most shameful death."³ Christ thus became an example not only of how to live nobly, but also how to die bravely. Nature has its claims, it is true, but Christ by choosing a most disgraceful and painful death taught His followers not to be troubled unduly as to whether they are to die at home, surrounded by those whom they love, or alone; at sea, or on land, suddenly, or knowing the hour. This is one of the reasons why the Son of God died on the cross—to be an example of how to die. Two most beautiful results of this example shine forth down the ages from the very first apostles invited by Jesus to follow Him. Peter and Andrew were both privileged to die as their Master had died, on a cross. Only see the change in Peter! Before the Passion he heard our Lord say that the Son of man must be spit upon and must be whipped and must be bound to a cross, but aghast at such a painful and shameful end, he expostulated vehemently: "Never, never, Lord, shall this happen to you." Years later he deemed the honor too great to die on a cross exactly as His Master had died; to make his death different from Christ's he begged to be crucified upside down! And Andrew, the very first one called, shared no doubt in the rebuke which Peter his brother had received on the occasion just mentioned: "Thou art a scandal unto Me, for thy wisdom is not of God, but of man." The cross of Christ was the magic which changed the base metal of human wisdom into the precious gold of divine, for afterward when he sighted the cross prepared for his execution Andrew did not cover his eyes from the disgrace, or shrink from the pain, but he ran forward exulting: "O good Cross, made beautiful by the body of my Lord! so long desired, so anxiously loved, so unceasingly sought after, and now at last ready for my soul to enjoy! take me from men and restore me to my Master, that by thee He may receive me, who by thee redeemed me!"

To St. Andrew, to us, redemption came by the nailing, the death on the tree,—as the cross is called in the Passion Preface: "Who hast appointed the salvation of mankind to be wrought by

³ Wisd. 2, 20.

the wood of the Cross; that whence death came; thence life might arise; and that he who overcame by the tree, might also by the tree be overcome." Here is another reason for the cross of Christ, and one which calls forth our unending praise for the divine wisdom which reacheth from end to end, mightily, and disposeth all things sweetly. How the wisdom of God, the divine perfection in every detail of His work, is manifested in this second reason for the cross! For by eating the fruit plucked from the forbidden tree, Adam sinned, and the glorious gift of immortality fled from his body when the true life of divine grace departed from his soul, and the devil laughed in triumph. "And so," says St. Thomas, "to atone for that sin it was fitting that Christ should suffer by being fastened to a tree, as if restoring what Adam had purloined; according to the Psalm: 'then did I pay that which I took not away.'" Life immortal was the fruit that ripened on the red cross for the sons of Adam, and the devil was despoiled of his undisputed sway over the human race when the body and soul of Christ were wrenched apart in that mighty agony which the very convulsions of the earth portrayed, as the end of the third hour came on. The hymn "Pange, Lingua, Gloriosi" repeated over and over during Passion time encompasses this idea of man's fall because of a tree, and his rise again to true life because of a tree:

"God, His Maker, sorely grieving
That the first-made Adam fell
When he ate the fruit of sorrow,
Whose reward was death and hell,
Noted then this Wood, the ruin
Of the ancient wood to quell.

For the work of our salvation
Needs would have His order so,
And the multiform deceiver's
Art, by art would overthrow,
And from thence would bring the med'cine
Whence the insult of the foe."⁴

"When you hear that He was lifted up, understand His hanging on high that He might sanctify the air Who had sanctified the earth by walking upon it."⁵ To cleanse the air that envelopes us, this is the third reason that the Creator of the world desired to be raised on high. But the air,—did the air

⁴ Neale's Tr.

⁵ Theophylact. in Joan. 3.

need cleansing? Not the air alone, but the whole universe was cleansed by the death of Christ, purified from the contamination which Satan had sifted upon it:

"He endured the nails, the spitting,
Vinegar, and spear, and reed;
From that holy Body broken
Blood and water forth proceed:
Earth, and stars, and sky, and ocean
By that flood from stain are free."⁶

That the air needed cleansing is not a mere fancy, or figure of speech, provided a moral cleansing be understood. Before the coming of Christ, man was dead in sins because he walked "according to the prince of the power of this air, of the spirit that now worketh on the children of unbelief."⁷ St. Paul here states that the air surrounding us was the broad highway for the devils seeking man's ruin. Taking up this apostolic truth St. Augustine says that "this darksome atmosphere is as a prison to the demons until judgment day."⁸ And St. Thomas repeats: "the demons are in this dark atmosphere for our trial."⁹ The wise Builder of the new spiritual edifice of grace must check, therefore, the cause of the moral filth that had littered up the world, and the way He died signified the work He accomplished. "Why, therefore, outside the city and in an open place, and not under any roof? This did not take place without a reason, but in order to cleanse the nature of the air: therefore He was offered on high in an unobstructed place, under no cover but with the sky stretched above as a roof that all the universe might be cleansed by the immolation of the Lamb in a high place. The earth was purified, the heavens were purified. For His Blood ran down from His side to the earth, purging away its stains and filth."¹⁰ And although Satan can still make the boast that he made of old: "I have gone round about the earth and walked through it!" still the cross of Christ by opening the store-houses of divine grace gave man access to a well-stocked armory of weapons to resist the attacks of the spirits of destruction. "These were not cast down to hell immediately after

⁶ Pange Lingua gloriosi. Neale's Tr.

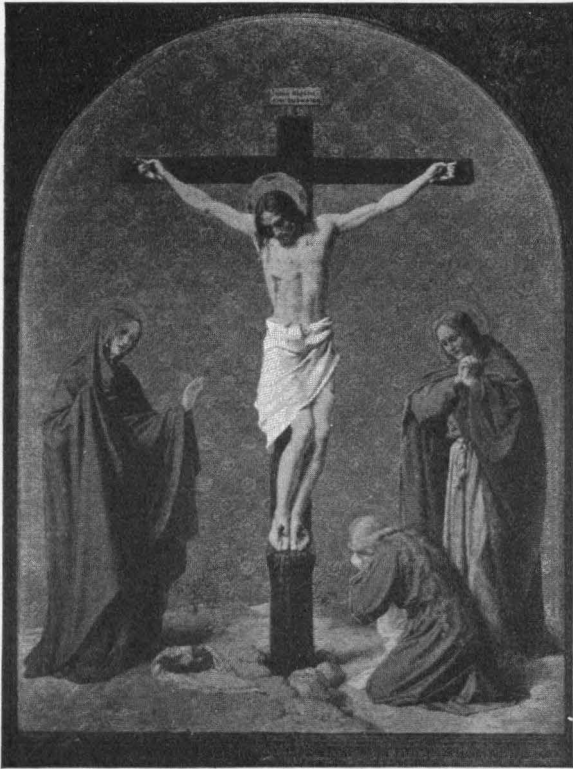
⁷ Eph. 2, 2.

⁸ Gen. ad lit. 3.

⁹ Summa Theol. I. Q. 64, a. 4.

¹⁰ S. John Chrys. De Cruce et Latr.

their fall, but are permitted to inhabit the air because God did not wish their creation to be absolutely in vain; and so He permits them to be a source of trial for men, thus preparing a crown for the good, but eternal death for the evil; and they



"All we like sheep have gone astray, every one hath turned aside into his own way: and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53, 6).

will remain in the atmosphere until the day of judgment because only then will the time of warfare and merit be over; after the day of judgment they shall be imprisoned in hell."¹¹ But by the cross of Christ, grace or divine help, sufficient to resist the evil one was purchased for every man who breathes the air, and thus

¹¹ S. Th. Comm. in Epis. ad Eph.

the air was cleansed when the cross clove it on Calvary. "And if," says St. Augustine, "some of (Satan's) arrows are discharged, and reach us, the Apostle reminds us how to render them harmless, when he speaks of the breastplate and the shield of faith. And if he sometime wounds us, we have the remedy at hand. For as the combatants are told, 'These things I write to you, that you may not sin'; so those who are wounded have the sequel to listen to, 'But if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Just. And He is the propitiation for our sins.' And what do we pray for when we say, 'Forgive us our trespasses,' but for the healing of our wounds? And what else do we ask, when we say, 'Lead us not into temptation,' but that he who thus lies in wait for us, or assails us from without, may fail on every side to effect an entrance, and be unable to overcome us either by fraud or force?"¹²

From Christ's own lips we have another reason why the cross was most fitting for the death of the Savior. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to Myself!" The Lord hung between earth and heaven, to signify that hereafter man's hope must be placed on high. The Lord was raised from the earth to signify that by His dying man was endowed with a life above that life which he lives in the body. The Lord was raised above the earth to signify that the supernatural life of divine grace is hereafter the only true life which man must preserve within himself, if he is to arrive at eternal life in heaven. By dying on high He signifies that He was preparing for men an ascent even to the high heavens. And he said "all things," to indicate that every class of men from the lowest to the highest, from the beggar to the king, was invited to ascend up to the heights of heaven. "All things, He says, I will draw after Me, that I may be the head of all, and they may be My members."¹³ To prepare for our ascent into heaven was the reason why Christ died. Death by crucifixion surely signified this effect: "therefore I pray, how should the Lord have otherwise accomplished it," asks St. Athanasius, "except by a cross high up in the air?"¹⁴

The fifth reason for the fitness of the cross is that such a

¹² Tr. 52 in Joan.

¹³ *ib.*

¹⁴ De Incarn. Verbo.

death is appropriate to the salvation of the entire world. St. Gregory of Nyssa says: "The shape of the cross extending out into four extremes from their central point denotes the power and providence diffused everywhere of Him Who hung upon it."¹⁵ Every nation under the sun, every soul from Adam to the latest and last born son of man must look to the cross for salvation: the symbol therefore, of salvation so indefinitely extended should be a cross because "the cross is the symbol of absolutely endless expansion; it is never content; it points forever and ever to four indefinitely receding points. You can enlarge it eternally without ever destroying its figure."¹⁶ The cross is the boundary line between the Old Dispensation and the New, and to signify that all are called to a common salvation died "with outstretched hands, in order to draw with one hand the people of old, and with the other those who spring from the Gentiles."¹⁷ And ever since that day when the veil of the temple was rent in two, the cross has been stretching forth its untiring arms to clasp the whole universe in its embrace; to invite all men to take up the chant soon to be intoned:

"Hail, Cross, of hopes the most sublime!
Now in this mournful Passion time,
Improve religious souls in grace,
The sins of criminals efface."¹⁸

Once when Blessed Henry Suso was suffering intensely from his self-imposed thirst, and longingly looking to God for alleviation, he heard this answer to his sighs: "Look, thou,—how thirsty was I not in the distress of My death, and with what vinegar and gall they tormented Me, yet all the cool springs of the earth were Mine!" Thus from the cross Christ teaches patience. And He teaches charity and obedience and all of the great virtues in their absolute perfection by means of the cross. As St. Thomas says in a beautiful and striking passage in one of his commentaries: "For here, there is obedience to God—'He humbled Himself, becoming obedient.' And likewise filial reverence towards parents is manifested, for from there He provided for His Mother. Charity also towards His neighbor, for

¹⁵ Serm. 1 de Resurr.

¹⁶ R. H. Benson: "Christ in the Church."

¹⁷ S. Athan. De Incarn.

¹⁸ Vexilla Regis Prodeunt—Blount's Tr.

He prayed for sinners—‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.’ And there also He showed patience in adversity. . . . ‘He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter, and shall be dumb as a lamb before his shearer, and he shall not open his mouth.’ And in each of these virtues there was final perseverance, for He persevered even unto death—‘Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit.’ And thus in the cross we find an example of every virtue.”¹⁹ Strange as it may seem, the very shape of the cross signified this perfection of the virtues shining forth from Christ for the example of men. And this fitness of the cross in signifying the virtues which it exercised in its divine Burden is the sixth reason given by the Fathers and by the Angelic Doctor why Christ died on a cross. It is as though the gifts bestowed by the Lord must be presented in a unique manner, just as at Christmas-time we are not content with giving gifts, but must also surround the gift with green holly betokening beforehand the joyful spirit prompting us. But what is there about the cross which suggests the perfection of Christ’s virtue? The Apostle Paul, commending charity, the bond of all the virtues, speaks of its “breadth and height and length and depth.”²⁰ These terms he employs to describe perfect charity. Now in the shape of the cross—what have we? That “length and breadth and height and depth,”—the perfection of charity and consequently of all the virtues. “And therefore we should know that Christ, Who was able to choose whatsoever kind of death He willed since it was out of love that He suffered death, chose the death of the cross, in which the four dimensions just mentioned are contained. The breadth is there in the transverse beam to which the hands were fastened, because charity ought to extend her works even to our enemies. . . . The length is there in the upright piece on which the whole body was extended, because the charity which upholds and gives salvation to man must persevere to the end. ‘But he that shall persevere unto the end, he shall be saved.’ Height is in the upper portion of the cross where the head lay, since our hope should mount even to the eternal and divine. ‘The head of every man is Christ.’ There also is the depth, namely in that part of the tree which was hidden under the earth and upheld the cross, but was un-

¹⁹ Comm. Epis. in Hebr. c. 12.

²⁰ Eph. 3, 18.

seen withal, because we are borne on the depths of divine love, but still it remains unseen."²¹

The seventh reason is because this kind of death responds to very many figures, which Divine providence used from the very beginning to herald the one event which is so magnificent that it alone has caused a break in the continuity of history, that is, the Life and Death of Christ. "For . . . an ark of wood preserved the human race from the waters of the Deluge; at the exodus of God's people from Egypt, Moses with a rod divided the sea, overthrew Pharaoh, and saved the people of God; the same Moses dipped his rod into the water, changing it from bitter to sweet; at the touch of a wooden rod a salutary spring gushed forth from a spiritual rock; likewise, in order to overcome Amalec, Moses stretched forth his arms with rod in hand; lastly, God's law is entrusted to the wooden Ark of the Covenant, all of which are like steps by which we mount to the wood of the cross."²²

With this last reason for the fitness of the cross as the instrument of Christ's death, St. Thomas closes the treatise as to "Whether Christ ought to have suffered on the cross,"²³ and goes on to ask other questions equally as interesting, instructive and devout. And these seven reasons and many more—if you would see them set forth in a way so simple as to be unmistakable, so profound as to me unfathomable, so piously eloquent as to be irresistible, you will find it in the *Imitation of Christ*, in the Second Book, in the Twelfth Chapter.

²¹ S. Th. Comm. Epis. ad Eph. c. 3.

²² Summa Theol. III, Q. 46, a. 4. (English Tr.)

²³ ib.

