

Good Friday Homily

Today is the day when it seems as though everything in the world is eerily still, and dark. The very hands that formed us from the soil are nailed upon the Cross, and the very one who gave us life today suffers and *dies*. And yet, we know too well that this day is called *Good Friday*. I ask you, how can one look at this reality of God Incarnate nailed to the Cross, suffering and dying, and call it good? This is a paradox; something that seems at face value to be utterly foolish, but upon further examination, it actually manifests profound, overwhelming Divine wisdom, which is accessible only to faith. What I'm about to share with you comes from a talk given at the seminary a few years ago by one of our resident priests, wherein he discusses the paradoxical logic of the Cross, and how this logic is concretized in our lives as we strive to follow Christ on the way to the Cross.

In First Corinthians chapter 1, St. Paul says that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...for the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” Here, St. Paul describes an uncanny and unsettling quality of Christianity. This quality proceeds from Christianity's paradoxical logic, which turns upside down our common-sense logic, but that contains a certain wisdom. From the rational scandal of the Christian message, there emerges its saving and transformative power. A crucified God-man is the paradigm or model of the logic of divinity and of the cross.

According to this logic, the greatest are least and least are greatest; the meek inherit the earth; kings wash the feet of their subjects; wealth is handed over to poverty; life found when lost; enemies loved; sins forgiven; freedom achieved through obedience; power made perfect in weakness; bread becomes flesh; wine becomes blood; the dead are raised to life. The one who rules is the one who serves. He is clothed in robes of nakedness, this king wears thorns woven into a crown, holds a reed as His scepter, is fastened to a wooden throne with sharp nails, dies, is buried, and comes to the surface as champion. To think, act, live with this logic, one must have a mind beyond the mind one had before. A metanoia is necessary, for the logic of the cross is the logic of paradox. This logic is also a logic of expiatory suffering, that is, suffering on behalf of the other in order to atone for the sins and the destitution of the other. The cross signals the act of substituting oneself in the place of the other in order to liberate the other.

In today's 21st-century world, suffering is interpreted as having only a negative connotation. It is to be eradicated at all costs. Think; there are some countries that claim to have *eradicated* Down's syndrome. They haven't; they've aborted those who have been conceived with it. Suffering is conflated with pain. Suffering and pain, then, are meaningless, irksome phenomena that have to go away. "The message of the cross," its message, presents formidable challenges to the insufferable lifestyle of self-sufficiency that we wish to have.

Take the word "suffer," from the Latin "sufferre," which we translate "to bear up, to endure." What does suffering hold up if not the other? Is this not the vocation to love, to make room for the other at the expense of one's own self-satisfaction? To hold up the other, one needs something supernatural—something that does not originate with the human being, who is only finite and natural. At the heart of "the message of the cross," its message, is the humble admission that a power is required that comes from outside of oneself—even more, outside of humanity—to humanize and to redeem. That something the cross manifests is *grace*, the gift which its recipient could not procure by his/her own initiative and willpower, the gift that connotes the unexpected, the undeserved, the unmerited, the uncontrollable. Think; the vicarious, that is, substitutionary, offering of the Incarnate Son of God unto death on the cross expresses divine grace to a degree that surpasses the divine act of creation from nothing. That God would become flesh, in order to regenerate flesh, redoubles the grace of created existence. "Deus est impassibilis, sed non incompassibilis," "God cannot suffer, but He cannot not 'suffer with.'" writes St. Bernard of Clairvaux. "Suffer," that is, "with us, for us."

Edith Stein was born on Yom Kippur in 1891. Growing up, she became "especially attracted to the ritual of this particular [Jewish] holy day when one refrained from taking any food or drink for twenty-four hours or more." In her "Life in a Jewish Family," she reveals that she was schooled in the ethics of alterity, the dignity of sacrifice, the discipline of penance, and the priority of the stranger. In her teenage years, she drifted away from her faith; but, at the age of twenty-six, she had an experience that pointed in the direction of Christianity.

Edith's friend, Adolph Reinach, was killed in World War I. When she went to visit Anna, Adolph's wife, Edith was amazed that Anna had not fallen into despair, but radiated her hope to be reunited with her husband in eternal life. Edith writes, "This was my first encounter with the Cross and the divine power that it bestows on those who carry it. For the first time, I was seeing with my very eyes the Church, born from Anna's Redeemer's suffering, triumphant over the sting of death. That was the moment my unbelief collapsed and Christ shone forth—in the mystery and the logic of the Cross."

The entire cosmos adheres to this logic, Edith asserts, to the pattern (the *paradoxical* pattern) in which life truly does spring forth from death, exaltation truly is conceived in humility, hope truly is born from suffering.

This logic defies human expectation and the tidy reasoning of worldly affairs. It involves a holy reversal, whereby that which is esteemed most highly is shown to be void of worth in comparison with Almighty God. Though it appears to be “a sign of contradiction,” the cross opens the human soul to its greatest human potential by actualizing the power of the divine Spirit. The Cross abolishes enmity between God and humanity. It reveals that God wishes to *suffer with* humanity and delights to dwell in the hiddenness, littleness, fragility of human souls.

In 1934, Edith entered the Carmelite convent in Cologne. There, she assumed the name Theresa Benedicta of the Cross. “Of the Cross” because she wished to follow John of the Cross, who had changed his name from “John of St. Mathias.” This change expressed the essential distinguishing mark of the Carmelite Reform: to follow Christ on the Way of the Cross. When Our Lord says, ‘My yoke is easy and my burden light,’ the burden is the cross” or when he says “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me,” then is the cross the symbol of all that is difficult and so against human nature that taking it upon oneself is like a journey to death that one must take every day.

In Sister Theresa’s last book, “Kreuzeswissenschaft,” “The Science of the Cross,” she aims at detecting the PATTERN OF THE CROSS IN THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS. By “pattern of the cross,” she means “a theology and spirituality of the cross that is buried in the soul of a saint like a seed that takes root there and grows, making a distinct impression on the soul, determining what it does and omits. From this pattern arises in one’s innermost depths a perspective of life, the very image one has of God, others, oneself, and the world.” The precise pattern follows the logic of the cross and its paradoxes that are accessible only to faith. And this logic and its paradoxes can be concretized according to three qualities: alterity, humility, and love.

Alterity means that the logic of the cross is other-centered rather than self-centered. Suffering, bearing up the other, finds its greatest meaning when it is suffering of voluntary expiation for the sake of other person. To bear up the other is to love the other. This does not mean we are to endure inhuman abusive treatment. Voluntary expiation for the sake of the other is evident in a parent’s caring for a sick or disabled child, in a child’s giving up his or her turn on a swing, in Fr. Kolbe’s offering himself for Mr. Gajowniczek,

Jesus' bearing mankind's sin, *and dying*, in order to give mankind life. The holy man or woman, the saint, is the one who concedes first place to the other, out of concern for the other, as an act of love.

Humility follows alterity. To be humble is to die a thousand deaths. These deaths are accomplished mostly in small, often unnoticeable, acts of loving care and service. In becoming attuned to the other, the humble soul dies to self-sufficiency and to the empty promises of honors, riches, self-interested ambitions. All becomes empty out of love for the other: time is turned into prayer, money transfigures into almsgiving, and food and drink are displaced by fasting, and, in turn, given over to the other who has none. Growing in humility is painful, very painful, since its goal is to purify and sanctify the soul, and to discipline the flesh and its wandering passions.

Love (or charity) is the greatest of the theological virtues, and we know that God is love. For Sr. Theresa, this means that anything other than love is beside the point, (why?) because anything outside of love would have no existence at all. "Love," or "Charity," translates "Caritas," and "Caritas" translates "agape," which names the love that seeks the good of others, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Sr. Theresa defines this love as "goodness giving itself away." This Love humbled itself to become flesh and loved all the way to the end, to the cross, on behalf of others. This is the Love we are humbly to become for others and to be with others. For, after His Incarnate Son, God has nothing left to give to His Bride, the Church. All has been given to her without remainder. (repeat) *This* is the definitive meaning of the cross, and this is why we call today "Good Friday." God has held out nothing for himself; he gave his Son. The Cross, the symbol of the greatest love, signifying the intersection of human and divine.

The cross paradoxically speaks the language of love in a bleeding setting of hatred. Only a lover inflamed with the holy passion of love for His beloved could have withstood the cruelty and rejection of this same beloved putting Him to death. But this He did and does to convince, persuade, and win back the beloved to the covenant He and the beloved had formed in the beginning. What wondrous love is this! We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world.