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THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS' DEATH IN THE PREFACES AND THROUGH THE HISTORICAL APPROACH: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

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In the many years that I taught Christian Living in the Grade School level, I will never forget the times when certain pupils would express that they could not comprehend how Jesus had to die to save us all from sin; how God, whom we proclaim to be a loving Father, would send His Son to die on the cross to save humankind. When I "inherited" these students as they turned Grades 3 and 4, this was already the understanding they had—that Jesus saved us by dying for our sins, and that God the Father had sent His Son into the world precisely to fulfill this mission. Most of them hardly questioned this; but for a few, this concept was something they truly grappled with. When I became a coordinator and observed the classes of Christian Life Education (CLE) teachers, I encountered one teacher who actually answered the question "Why did Jesus die?" with "To save us from our sins."

There is so much to be said regarding this, but suffice it to say that although this theological interpretation of Jesus' death is rich with meaning and significance, it only serves to confuse when it is not explained properly, and especially when it is not grounded first

and foremost on the historical reality of Jesus' death: that Jesus was killed as a result of His resolute and faithful living out of His mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God. This holds true much more so for children and young adolescents.

With these differences in the meaning and significance given to Jesus' death in mind, I went through the Prefaces for Weekdays and Sundays in Ordinary Time to ascertain the theological interpretation of Jesus' death as expressed therein. To my surprise, four out of the eight Prefaces for Sundays and two out of the six Prefaces for Weekdays explicitly pronounce that Jesus' suffering and death on the cross saved us from sin and death.[1] The four Sunday Prefaces convey the following expressions regarding Jesus' passion and death: "Through his cross and resurrection he freed us from sin and death," "By suffering on the cross he freed us from unending death," "In His suffering we are freed from sin," and "When your children sinned and wandered far from your friendship, you reunited them with yourself through the blood of your Son and the power of the Holy Spirit."[2]

These statements highlight the salvific work of Jesus more than His "person." Very much in line with the Biblical and Classical Patristic view, they show that Jesus' suffering and death freed and saved us from the bondage and darkness of sin and death. Msgr. Louis Soubigou says of Preface I: "The glory to which the Preface refers is... of the magnificent titles we bear in Christ *in consequence of a three-fold deliverance—from* 1) *death,* 2) *sin and* 3) *darkness"* (emphasis mine).[3] Many, if not most, of the statements in these Prefaces are in fact lifted from Scripture, which Classical-Patristic Soteriology repeats.[4] The same applies for Prefaces for Weekdays in Ordinary Time.

The two Prefaces for Weekdays in Ordinary Time that likewise reveal the above understanding of Jesus' passion and death state: "Though his nature was divine, he stripped himself of glory and by shedding his blood on the cross he brought his peace to the world."

And "For our sake he opened his arms on the cross; he put an end to death and revealed the resurrection. In this he fulfilled your will and won for you a holy people."[5] The former reveals an understanding of Jesus' death as expiation when it says, "by shedding his blood on the cross." The latter reveals not only the theological reflection that Jesus died to save us ("For our sake he opened his arms on the cross,") but also that Jesus did His Father's will through His passion, death, and resurrection. "In this he fulfilled your will" somehow impresses upon us that God sent His Son Jesus to save us by suffering and dying on the cross; that Jesus was the "Sacrificial Lamb" who obediently allowed himself to be slaughtered for our sake.

When viewed in light of the historical approach, the theological interpretation of the meaning and significance of Jesus' death in the said Prefaces is quite incomplete, and, in a sense, can even be misleading. The historical approach shows that Jesus *was killed* because of the radicality of what He preached by His words and His very life. He did not just open His arms on the cross and die for our sins; rather, He faced his death resolutely and accepted it as the inevitable consequence of fidelity to His mission, as asked of Him by His God. Thus, what God was asking of Him was faithfulness to His mission; and death was a consequence of such. This reveals a very active approach, compared to that of the identified Prefaces, which focus only on Jesus' dying, as if there was no fight involved. Furthermore, the historical approach shows that by accepting His death as a consequence of His mission, which is *service,* Jesus' death becomes a form of service.

Thus, the "reality" of Jesus' crucifixion and death reveals very clearly that Jesus' death was a consequence of His mission of proclaiming and inaugurating the Kingdom of God. He lived His mission in a way no human being ever has, and as such, invited a lot of ill will and anger from those who disliked and feared His message and lifestyle. Moreover, Jesus' death was constitutive of His

mission—for fidelity to His mission necessitated facing such a violent death.

It is noteworthy to mention that Preface VII of Sundays and Preface V of Weekdays in Ordinary Time, though they do not explicitly express the theological interpretation as in the above Prefaces, nevertheless imply such an understanding. The former specifically focuses on salvation through the obedience of Christ: "Your gifts of grace, lost by disobedience, are now restored by the obedience of your Son."[6] This interpretation is beautiful in that it brings to mind God's loving action in salvation history, and reveals Christ as the "New Adam". However, it also makes us conceive of Jesus' obedience in dying a violent death as fulfilling His mission of saving us, when, looking at the historical reality of His death, there is much more here than plain obedience. Jesus' agony on the cross does not glorify suffering and death through meek obedience, but rather, shows Jesus' resoluteness in living out His mission. Once more, Jesus' suffering and death were a *consequence* of His mission, and *constitutive* of His mission.

The latter, Preface V of Weekdays in Ordinary Time, states, "With love we celebrate his death"[7] seemingly suggesting that we rejoice because Jesus' death brought us salvation. If we were to see His death through the historical approach, however, we would appreciate more deeply that we celebrate his death because of the way He radically lived His life and fulfilled His mission of loving service. This prods me to ask, "Why do we not emphasize and celebrate His life and ministry as well, so that His self-offering and death will become more meaningful and relevant to us?" Fr. Carlos Abesamis says that Jesus went about *giving life* to people through teaching, healing, forgiving, feeding, gathering (all Kingdom and messianic actions) which eventually led to his being put to death.[8] Moreover, he adds that Jesus "brought and continues to bring about salvation through his *ministry,* death, resurrection, and parousia (emphasis mine)."[9] Nowhere in any of the Prefaces in Ordinary Time do we find mention of Jesus' ministry, how His very life proclaimed

and inaugurated the Kingdom of God—not just His death. Only Preface III of Weekdays in Ordinary Time comes close to doing so. Not only does it *not* mention the paschal mystery explicitly, particularly the notion of Jesus dying to save us; but more so, it alludes to two Kingdom actions—that are very significant in Jesus' ministry—gathering us into a human family, and restoring our dignity as God's children: "Through your beloved Son you created our human family. Through him you restored us to your likeness."[10]

It cannot be denied that there is such a stark difference in the meaning and significance of Jesus' death as expressed in the Prefaces, compared to that engendered by the historical approach. It also cannot be denied that what prevails in the understanding of many people, at least among Filipino Christians, is a more or less distorted notion of the Biblical and Classical theological reflections on Soteriology as expressed in the Prefaces—a notion that many times negatively affects *spirituality* and *discipleship.*

I do not propose that we do away with these theological interpretations, as they are very rich in meaning. They bring out the various aspects of the Eucharist: sacrifice, memorial, communion, and its eschatological implications.[11] However, I do see two very important challenges that need to be responded to by those who minister to the faith: to creatively lead people to the right, proper, and positive understanding of these theological reflections; and, more importantly, to "flip the coin" so to speak, so that people see the other side and get a more complete picture, and thus grow in a fuller understanding of Jesus' death and how Jesus saves us. Relegating this concern to the background will sadly maintain the *distorted* understanding of the titles "Sacrificial Lamb" and "Suffering Servant" as applied to Jesus, thereby re-enforcing the "culture of victimization" and "spiritualization of suffering" that abound in Philippine society. I believe that such an understanding, through God's grace, can very well lead to a paradigm shift, a revolution from the heart, a community of disciples with a renewed consciousness, renewed relations, and a renewed sense of mission that will contribute more and more to the

building up of the Kingdom of God. Only by seeing both sides of the same coin can we grow ever more fully in appreciation of and faithful commitment to our being and constant evolving into the *New People of God:* "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart.[12]

NOTES

[1]These Prefaces are as follows: Sundays in Ordinary Time I, II, IV and VIII; Weekdays in Ordinary Time I and VI.

[2]Preface for Sundays in Ordinary Time I, II, IV and VIII respectively.

[3]Msgr. Louis Soubigou, *A Commentary on the Prefaces and the Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Missal,* trans. Rev. John A. Otto (U.S.A.: The Liturgical Press, 1969), p.152.

[4]Raymond Moloney, S.J., shows which parts of the Scripture the expression in 4 Eucharistic prayers are cited from, in his book *Our Eucharistic Prayers in Worship, Preaching and Study* (Delaware, Michael Glazier, Inc., 1985).

[5]Preface for Weekdays in Ordinary Time I and VI respectively.

[6]Preface VII of Sundays in Ordinary Time.

[7]Preface V of Weekdays in Ordinary Time.

[8]Carlos Abesamis, *On Mark and the New World, the Good News: Letter from Carlos Abesamis,* Theology in the Third World, SPI Series 1 and 2 (Quezon City: Socio Pastoral Institute, 1983), p. 19.

[9] Ibid., p. 47.

[10] Preface III of Weekdays in Ordinary Time.

[11] Andre Rose, *The New Prefaces in The New Liturgy: A Comprehensive Introduction to the New Liturgy as a Whole and to its New Calendar, Order of Mass, Eucharistic Prayers, the Roman Canon, Prefaces and the New Sunday*

Lectionary, Lancelot Sheppard, ed. (Great Britain, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd. 1970), p. 254.

[12] Preface 1 of Sundays in Ordinary Time. The text is cited from 1 Peter 2:9. Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* also uses this text from 1 Peter.