FROM MANGER CRIB TO THE WOOD OF THE CROSS

The Lord’s Incarnation, a Prophecy of the Passion

In the Old Testament, the coming of the Lord into the midst of his people was an event already announced centuries before its fulfillment. *The people who walked in darknesshave seen a great light;Upon those who lived in a land of glooma light has shone…For a child is born to us, a son is given to us;upon his shoulder dominion rests.They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero*(Is 9,1; 5)He who is our Powerful God, nevertheless will come to us as an infant totally dependent for everything. Still, according to Isaiah, he will hide his divine grace, and he will be tested by suffering and contempt. *He had no majestic bearing to catch our eye,no beauty to draw us to him…He was spurned and avoided by men,a man of suffering, knowing pain…But he was pierced for our sins,crushed for our iniquity.* (Is 53, 2; 3; 5)

St. Paul the Apostle sums up this progression with his well-known hymn in Philippians: *Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus,Who, though he was in the form of God,did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.Rather, he emptied himself,taking the form of a slave,coming in human likeness;and found human in appearance,he humbled himself,becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.Because of this, God greatly exalted himand bestowed on him the namethat is above every name,that at the name of Jesusevery knee should bend,of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,and every tongue confess thatJesus Christ is Lord,to the glory of God the Father* (Phil 2, 5-11).

In this text, Jesus is presented in terms of his passage from heaven to earth, later to return to heaven once he has fulfilled the redemption of humankind and of the cosmos.In particular, he divests himself of his divinity, and, in the Incarnation, assumes the condition of a laborer, thus coming to join the human family on earth. Here, he humbles himself even more through his obedience unto death on the cross: it is his Passion experience given out of love, and couched in sorrow, for us!For this reason, the Father exalts him and makes him Lord of all creatures, so that they will acknowledge his authority and the power of his love, which was acquired at the cost of his Blood.

Paul of the Cross kept the contemplation of the Cross as the center of his life; his spirit lingered on the Incarnation of the Word, his attention held by loving devotion, knowing that in that Incarnation was the proclamation and foreshadowing of Jesus’ immolation. Consequently, he began a particular ritual for Christmas night which would honor the One who became an infant for our salvation. “Paul would carry in procession a devotional statue of the Holy Infant [*Santo Bambino*], and he liked it to be wrapped in swaddling cloths, because it more meaningfully gave rise to wonder that the Divine Omnipotence, Goodness and Wisdom, should be wrapped in poor people’s diaper cloths. (Zoffoli - S. Paolo della Croce - II, 1166 )”The Founder was both wonder-struck and enthused at seeing God become like a small and needy child, the least of all others, just as he would be during his Passion. For our sake, Our God, an infant in diapers, lying on straw in a manger; for our sake being warmed by the breathing of a couple of horses. O, what light, what fire blazes in the stall at Bethlehem! Woe to me, if in the presence of such a light, in the heat of such a flame, I am not consumed by holy love, and even worse, should I remain indifferent and cold as I was at first! (Lett. ai Passionisti, 89) Paul encouraged even those souls whom he directed to contemplate this mystery, so that they might be reborn in the Divine Word unto a new life.

“With regard to the contemplation of the most sacred Mystery, it is enough if one can contemplate through an active faith an Immense God who becomes an infant [*Bambino*] out of Love for us, the fact that it is done with the imagination doesn’t matter. However, it is better yet to be able to do so out of pure faith, without the imaginative component: in that way, the soul is left free to contemplate such a great Mystery as the Sovereign and Divine Master will instruct the soul. ( Laici, 658)” “I do not fail to pray Jesus to bring you to rebirth into a new life of holy love; and if you are faithful, as I hope you will be, this divine and spiritual Nativity will come to pass in the temple of your spirit, not only now, but always, as long as you remain faithful, alone in your interior, and resting your spirit in the heart of God, in sacred silence, and in holy love (Laici, 670)”

Paul, however, does not end with this tender meditation; he quickly moves on to consider the Divine Infant on the cross since Jesus already knew of the death which awaited him for the redemption of humankind. To Sr. Angela Cencelli, Discalced Carmelite, he wrote: “Many years ago I had an Infant painted on German paper that had him sleeping quietly on a cross. Oh, how much that symbol pleased me! I gave it to a crucified person of holy life… I wished, as I desire for you, for that soul to be a child in purity and simplicity and she sleep on the cross of the gentle Jesus. So on Christmas you will have the Infant in your heart and be transformed entirely into him with love. Sleep with him on the crib of the cross, and at the divine lullaby that Mary Most Holy will sing go to sleep with the Divine Infant, being in union with his heart. The lullaby of Mary will be: *May your Will be done on earth as in heaven.* The second verse will be: *To work, to suffer, and to be silent*, and the third: *Do not justify yourself, do not complain, do not show resentment*. (The Letters of St. Paul of the Cross, Volume Three; New York, New City Press, 2000; pg. 130).”

In a like manner he writes to the Signora Maria Giovanna Venturi Grazi: “I wish for your heart to be like a crib for the sweet Infant, and that he be born mystically for you. You shall follow him if you are faithful, as I hope you will be, in remaining hidden, in the solitude of your inner self, resting with the Infant upon the Cross, and casting all of your afflictions onto the fire of the divine Goodness with a true, silent and total abandon to the Most Holy Will of God. (Laici, 583)”

St. Paul of the Cross had kept this image in his room. “The Servant of God had over the right hand side of his bed a small frame, about two palms in width, which portrayed the Infant Jesus [*Bambino Gesù*] asleep on a cross. He would look on the Crucifix with a loving gaze, and he would become filled with ardent love; then he would gaze on the Infant sleeping on the cross, and he would become determined to bear all sufferings which beset him out of love for the object of his love. (Processi III,465)”

The Son of God knew the outcome of his life on earth from the first moment of his Incarnation, his painful death on the cross. St. Paul of the Cross, in the light of this knowledge, loved to picture Jesus as someone who from his childhood carried the cross in the back of his mind and in his heart; he could picture the Divine Infant resting his small limbs up against the wood of the cross.This image prophetically prefigured the Passion of the Lord, and helped Paul to contemplate those sufferings to come. To see the Infant Jesus supine on the cross helped Paul to reflect on the God-Man humiliated and crucified for our salvation. This reflection stimulated Paul to live, lovingly, the many sufferings he would endure throughout his life: his physical ailments which throughout his life would nail him to his own bed; the personal suffering of his long years of aridity and night of the soul; those sufferings he endured as founder of the Congregation and the role of leader; his sufferings on behalf of the Church and for each Christian soul; he wished for the salvation of all by virtue of the Passion of Christ.

From the Infant lying on the cross, Paul could recognizer and adopt the typical reactions of small children, especially when they meet up with suffering. Even when suffering, a small child remains simple and confidently entrusting himself to the care of mother or father. Since Jesus is born on this solemn feast, let us also be childlike with him, retiring ever more into our true nothingness, humble, as simple as children. Let our obedience be total, open, transparent, with a love for holy poverty, loving the more when burdened with suffering; let us submit to the guidance of our superiors, and thus we shall be true imitators of the sweet Infant Jesus, who was in all things handed over to the care of his divine Mother, Mary (Lett. ai Passionisti, 83).

“The entire life of Jesus was cross and martyrdom,” says the Imitation of Christ.All of the existence of the Savior was, in effect, marked by suffering, and not even was his infancy exempted from it. Let us consider the moment of the Incarnation, his coming into the human condition in a powerless and limited form. He remained nine months in the womb of his mother, a poor daughter of Israel. At his birth, we see him surrounded by both poverty and darkness. Consider Jesus at the time of Herod’s persecution, and the risks of escaping into Egypt. In all things, Jesus was guided and led by Mary and Joseph. In the same way, thirty years later, he will be taken in hand by those who hate him, the judges and executioners, to be carried to the tribunal and to the cross; he will abandon himself to the will of his Father with complete trust.

Paul proposes these attitudes derived from faith to those whom he guides as spiritual director. His exhortation is that their lives should take all that afflicts their souls and bodies and give it as an offering on the fire of divine love, with a complete abandon to the will of God. He even writes a spiritual hymn which invites persons to suffer the sorrows of life in silence, to not complain, without resentment or self-justification when one finds oneself in the crucible of physical or spiritual distress. There is no better way to confront any trial than to repose on the bed of the wood of the cross together with the Divine Infant. ce con il Bambino divino. If the cross, with all its roughness inspires fear in us, and makes it more difficult to approach Jesus Crucified, the smile of the Infant Jesus, lying on his wooden resting place, even if in the form of a cross, will give us courage and hope in taking the path to Calvary.

In conclusion, let us recall a particular incentive that we have in the Passionist Congregation, Blessed Lorenza Maria of St. Francis Xavier (Salvi). He, along with the Founder, cultivated in his own life a special devotion to the infancy of Christ. As a missionary, he taught the people about the sweet and gentle Infant Jesus [*Bambino Gesù*]in order to encourage hearts to virtue and goodness, and to console those who were suffering.

We, Passionist Nuns, are called to contemplate and live this one mystery of faith and of love: the Nativity and the Passion; the Infant of Bethlehem and the Man of sorrows!

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[Scripture texts from NABRE]