

Good Friday 2020

When Good Friday comes around, my mind will often go back to an encounter I had with some young school children one Lenten season. I had been invited to watch their passion play, and afterward meet with them. Their questions all had something to do with the account of the suffering and death of Jesus: why did Judas betray Jesus; why was Jesus praying in a garden; why were people so mean to him, and so on. Toward the end of the session, one little ten-year old girl asked the question which really got to the heart of it all: "Why did Jesus have to die on the Cross? Why couldn't he have just forgiven everybody instead of suffering so much and dying?" That little girl asked the question, which has redounded through the centuries in the hearts and minds of people of all ages, adult and child alike, and today stands at the heart of our liturgy: "Why the Cross?"

We need to engage and grapple with this. As we venerate the Cross on Good Friday, the Church proclaims: "Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world." The stakes could not be higher. Lifting up the Cross places before our mind's eye the instrument by which God himself acted to bring to the whole world the gift of everlasting life. More than a matter of life and death, the question "Why the Cross" is one of eternal life and eternal death. We cannot avoid seeking to discover the answer to it.

How might we approach this all-important question? I suggest we do so today by consideration of a number of other questions facing everyone right now as we struggle to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first one pertains to cost. These days we are witnessing the expenditure, by various levels of government worldwide, of astonishing sums of money. Billions, even trillions of dollars are pledged. This has to give us pause. What is it about this particular virus, that our leaders are willing to spend so much to stop its spread and limit its impact? What do our medical, economic and political leaders see that we don't? If they are willing to spend so much, this virus must be a threat of catastrophic proportion to our individual and collective well-being.

When we look upon the Cross, we see with yet greater astonishment that even the enormous sums expended to fight the virus pale in comparison to what God has paid to save us. The price of our salvation is nothing less than the Crucifixion of the Son of God, a sum beyond all dimension. As we gape in amazement at this bewildering fact, we ask: what does God see that we don't? What is the calamity so ruinous to our immortal souls that God has given his only Son to rescue us?

This takes us to the question of diagnosis. At the outset of the pandemic as people began to fall sick, medical science set about the task of identifying the cause. Researchers also needed to determine how the disease was transmitted. The malady infecting our souls was identified long ago by Sacred Scripture. The virus that wormed its way into the human condition from the very beginning was simply and tragically this: surrender to a lie. The serpent told Adam and Eve that God was not to be trusted, that his admonitions were not for their good, that God was a threat to their freedom, and that therefore they should rely not on God but upon themselves. Our first parents chose to believe the lie and allowed their trust in the wisdom and providence of God to die, a decision manifested in the act of disobedience and rebellion. This caused a rupture in humanity's original communion with God and a separation among human beings themselves, fissures that

both widened and deepened as the contagion spread. The manner of transmission was the repetition in each individual life of the original sin, the choice to trust in oneself and distrust God, a determination that continued to reveal itself in a turning away from all that God gives us. Unless and until this sickness of soul was arrested and healed, the human family would continue in a perpetual state of separation from God, and of ongoing fracture within itself.

With this biblical diagnosis, we can begin to see why God acted the way he did to save us, why he paid such an enormous price, why the Cross. A cure for COVID-19 might still elude us, but the antidote to the disease of distrust and rebellion was clear from the beginning. Only a human act of perfect obedience to God, rooted in unalloyed trust in divine providence, could overcome the human act of disobedience that lay at the root of history's misery. Since no human being could ever do what needed to be done, God chose to become one of us to take our part. He paid the price by sending his only beloved Son to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. In his human nature Jesus was always, in any and every circumstance, perfectly obedient to the Father, even to the point of giving his life for us on the Cross. This is the human act of obedience that fully cancelled the human act of disobedience by our first parents and thus restored humanity to communion with the Father, and ourselves to one another.

By our Baptism, that grace of salvation has been communicated to us. That sacrament unites us to Christ and enables us to have a share in his fidelity to God. Yet, the calamity of that first sin was so enormous that it has left us all in a weakened state. This means that we continue to be vulnerable to temptation, to the possibility of refusing participation in the fidelity of Jesus and choosing instead to live by our own devices. This in turn means that we need constantly to examine the state of our souls. How to do this?

Helpful here is the question about testing for the virus. A key element of the struggle against the coronavirus is the need to determine with clarity if someone has actually contracted it. This has proven to be a challenge. I may demonstrate COVID-like symptoms, but not have the disease. On the other hand, I may be an asymptomatic carrier of it. The only way to know the truth of the matter is to administer a test. We are struggling, though, with limited supplies, so the question has come up about how much testing we can do, who must be tested, who not, and so on.

As regards the state of our spiritual health, testing is given to all of us without exception. It happens in various ways. It may be the test we call temptation, when we, like our first parents, are seduced by a lie into distrusting God. That lie may come to us by the mendacity of others; it could be a falsehood we tell ourselves. The test could also come our way in the form of life's hardships, such as the enormous ones caused now by the pandemic. In whatever the form and however difficult, the testing is necessary because it reveals to us the truth of things, the real state of our soul. On the surface, I may seem in my own mind and in the assessment of others to be asymptomatic; everything is good. What comes to light from the test is the truth: perhaps that I have, in fact, chosen myself over God and made some horrifying decisions in consequence, or that in the midst of pain and suffering I really do doubt that God loves me, that he has not abandoned me.

As we look at our test results, we may be tempted further to despair over our evident weakness. Here, God continues to come to our help through the gift of his Son. Jesus also knew

what it was to be tested. In fact, as *Hebrews* tells us, he was tested in every way that we are, though he remained without sin. Because of this, Jesus is able fully “to sympathize with us in our weaknesses.” He understands everything we go through. He forgives us when we fail, and by placing our faith and hope in him and never in ourselves, he will help us endure further temptations and stay faithful.

All these considerations provide us with the answer to our original question, “Why the Cross?” There we see on full display the infinite love of God for us. On the Cross is revealed the love of the Father, who did not spare his own Son to overcome our sin of rebellion and restore us to himself and one another. On the Cross is made manifest, too, the love of the Son, who willingly came from heaven to assume our sorry state, suffer himself the full weight of our sin, and overcome it by his death, his perfect act of obedience to the Father. The Cross is the sign God gives us to communicate clearly and in unsurpassable fashion the immensity of His love for us and the invincible power of that love. In the outstretched arms of the Saviour, we see God’s love embracing all humanity of all time. From this we know he is with us now, assuring us of his love and, in this time of trial, inviting us never to lose faith in His power to save us.

The answer to the question, “Why the Cross,” says something about us, too. If, by the Cross of his Son, God has brought us back to Himself and one another, we can see in our Crucified Lord the way of life that must be that of every Christian: one marked by surrender to God and the loving embrace of our neighbour. The Cross is the sign of how we are to live as followers of our Lord. May today’s lifting up and veneration of the Cross be an invitation to others to be one with us in the journey of holiness, communion, healing and peace.

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St. Joseph’s Basilica (Livestreamed)
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