

for the time when the Lord's Cross, which here on earth erstwhile I saw, will fetch me from this fleeting life, and bring me where there is great gladness, joy in Heaven. . . . A friend to me may the Lord be, who here on earth suffered aforetime on the Cross for the sins of men. . . . He has redeemed us, has given us life, a heavenly abode'.

Though more than twelve centuries have passed, we can still appreciate the simple devotion of this early English poet, whose verses should have an especial appeal for us priests, working in his native land. The lesson of the Cross for us can hardly be more clearly stated: '. . . then did I tremble, when the Man embraced me; yet durst I not bow down to the earth . . . I was bound to stand fast'. But there is comfort too in the words of the Cross: '. . . I can heal all those that fear me; once was I become the cruellest of torments . . . until I opened to men the true path of life'. We may indeed make our own the prayer of the poet: 'A friend to me may the Lord be. . . . He has redeemed us, has given us life, a Heavenly abode.'



THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

DEBORAH PEASE ARMSTRONG

ONE of the actions which signifies the presence of a Catholic Christian is making the sign of the cross. The result would startle us if we counted up the number of times we make it during one day or during one celebration of Holy Mass. This sign becomes an automatic part of our lives, to sign the sign of the cross can be almost a reflex action; and surely non-Catholics may be forgiven if they suppose it to be just another bit of external ritual, enforced habit or even superstition. Perhaps at any one moment it may in the concrete be only one of these things, but this sign has an almost infinite richness in itself of which it may be worth while to attempt a brief exploration.

Writing on *The Meaning of Existence* (p. 119) Dom Illtyd

Trethowan says ' . . . God builds things (as it were) in layers'. Remembering that it is God who 'builds things in layers', we trace the cross in its development under the divine touch from a Roman gallows to the threshold of the transcendent and eternal life of divine glory. All the 'layers' of this meaning are gathered into the 'sign' of the cross.

It is at the same time a physical thing, a spiritual experience, and to the eye of faith a promise for the future: it is not only the cross but the *crossing*, the supreme moment of contact between God and fallen man.

The same cross which the Roman government provided to kill a political prisoner became the means which God used to unite all men to him in perfect happiness for ever. It is only because the cross was first the gallows that it is now the most powerful sign in the world, the sign of salvation.

St Irenaeus gives it a more mysterious reality; he says: 'And the sin that was wrought through the tree was undone by the obedience of the tree, obedience to God whereby the Son of God was nailed to the tree. . . . And because he is himself the Word of God Almighty, who in his invisible form pervades us universally in the whole world, and encompasses both its length and breadth and height and depth—for by God's Word everything is disposed and ministered—the Son of God was also crucified in these, imprinted in the form of a cross on the universe—for he had necessarily, in becoming visible, to bring to light the universality of his cross, in order to show openly through his visible form that activity of his: that it is he who makes bright the height, that is what is in heaven, and holds the deep, which is in the bowels of the earth, and stretches forth and extends the length from east to west, navigating also the northern parts and breadth of the south, and calling in all the dispersed from all sides to the knowledge of the Father' (*Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*).

But the cross has another 'layer' of reality in human experience. 'Take up your cross and follow me' is a familiar text, and Christians are often admired for the extraordinary fortitude and joy they are able to show while suffering. The cross is as deeply planted in our lives as in the universe pictured by St Irenaeus, and the weight and severity of our individual 'cross' bears a proportion to our personal love of God. The spirit of the world which rejects suffering rejects Christ.

Our supernatural life is marked upon the soul at Baptism in the form of the Cross of Christ; this sacrament therefore joins us not only to the supernatural life of God in heaven but also to the sign of the Word in the universe. This mark upon the soul can be compared to the grain of mustard seed, for it is the opening through which divine life and love may enter. It is the wound of love and as love increases towards God so the wound grows, for love and suffering grow together.

Great courage is needed to love God greatly because to love God means to *love* the suffering of his Son, since there is no love without sharing. God gives unmeasured love in return for love, but the price of love is pain. Since love and joy cannot be separated, we can now see that the cross is a sign of divine life, a life essentially above ours where joy and pain are united.

Because this life is a divine one, and only in the divine incarnation can joy and pain be united in simplicity, in this world we can only love suffering with the help of supernatural faith. When the evil of pain is experienced as repugnant, if it is then possible through faith to make an act of love, then the soul is drawing nearer to a share in the cross of Christ and his saving work.

It is as if the Christian must learn to be transfixed by the point of the cross (which is in a sense also a sword). We die thus to self a thousand times and each time our soul opens wider to receive the life and love of God.

We have been building up the reality gathered into the sign of the cross. There is first the physical cross of wood, then the sweet and holy tree which bore the flowers of salvation. Then there is the cross in personal experience, the searing pain which is the glory of Christian life, the supernatural mark upon the soul which makes the entrance for divine life. Lastly we may think of the cross as the sign of our liberation, our way out from sin and suffering to fulfilment and perfect joy.

Christ told us that he was 'the way'. It is only possible to understand this literally, as we should, if we remember the perfect simplicity of Christ's Being. When he had compassion, he *was* compassion, when he had grief he *was* grief. When he saves us he is salvation and when he suffers crucifixion he *is* the cross. Thus he is the way, and the cross is the way. We can only enter heaven through the cross.

It is a mistake to think of the cross as symbolizing only pain, for it is steeped in the sweet perfume of love. The sword which pierces the heart is aflame (and sets the heart aflame) with the fires of love. The perfume of loving sacrifice, the flames which leap round the point of the sword are the hall-mark of the divine Creator, for he is love, and his presence is *shown* by the presence of love.

When through faith we know in the cross, the gateway to eternal life, that fusion of the greatest pain and the greatest love, then we are almost near enough to beat upon that door.

Most of us will reach this point only in purgatory. The Saints come to it in this world. Meanwhile it is possible to cultivate a deep love for the cross, a love fostered each time we sign ourselves and giving us the courage to press steadily forward even when the cross of suffering seems to bar the way.

Above all the sign of the cross must bring to us not an empty symbol of pain, but the cross with Christ upon it. He is also on that cross marked on our soul; thus when we are hurt it is he who is hurt, so our compassion must be for him and not for that self which must die.

The sign of the cross is not to be lightly made, nor is the cross itself to be feared, it is the sign of the Word 'signed upon the universe'.



LIFE THROUGH THE CROSS¹

PAUL FOSTER O.P.

IN a famous picture of the Crucifixion the Cross is depicted soaring against a dark background of cloud, over the quiet waters of Genesareth—it recalls that moment when the Lord awakened from slumber in the heart of the storm and spoke the words . . . 'peace, be still' . . . and immediately there was a great calm.

It may have happened to many of you, as it happened to the

¹ The substance of a sermon delivered in Westminster Cathedral, Good Friday 1954.