

CATECHISM FOR ADULTS: XIII

'THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY AND LIFE EVERLASTING'

IAN HISLOP, O.P.

THE triumph of Christ for St Paul was most clearly shown in the resurrection. Being dead, he was buried and the third day rose again. The risen Christ was seen and St Paul lists the occasions (1 Cor. 15). The resurrection is the supreme point of the triumph of God's grace in the world, for it demonstrates that the flesh is redeemed. This does not merely mean that the corporeal, the quantitative element in man, is redeemed. It means a conquest of all that is alien from God in man's life.

It is, of course, true that body, the whole sphere of sensation and imagination, becomes through Christ an instrument of salvation. Each sacrament is an occasion of the redemption of the whole man, and in each sacrament the physical and sensory is the sign of God's action. Body is, therefore, not something inimical to the action of grace; far from being a poison or the instrument of corruption, it is of its nature made for God. The flesh as alien to God means something more complex. It is the whole man closed to God, feeding on his own resources. Man as independent of God and hence the victim of his illusions. Man the idol maker, cut off from the Creator, yet still creative. The symbol of his creation is no longer marriage: union with the ground of existence, life in the garden of controlled fertility: the symbol is adultery, the burning of the child, the jumping and slashing before the altars of Baal—creation and fertility run riot, become malignant because of sin.

This is overthrown by Christ: body is no longer evil flesh, but the carrier of resurrection. Because the Son condescends, subjects his body to the powers of evil, he redeems flesh. In the flesh the victory is won by the Word made flesh. In consequence, the power of Christ is at work in that sphere which we tend to think of as unspiritual. St James writes: 'Is any man sick among you? Let him call in the priests of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayers

of faith shall save the sick man. And the Lord shall raise him up.' (James 5, 15.) Through the anointing of the sacrament of Extreme Unction the power of Christ in the body is shown. This sacrament, as the Council of Trent states (Session XIV), not only strengthens the soul of the sick person, but at times, if it is an aid to that person's salvation, restores bodily health. In the sacrament, then, the Church carries on the healing work of Christ, which is not only an effect of his Lordship, but a sign of a greater restoration.

It is true that Christ's redemptive activity brings about a renewal of man's spirit that sets him in a new relation to Christ. This restoration is one, however, of the whole being of man, whose mind and will are not graced in isolation, but as functions of an embodied being. 'Shun', writes St Paul, 'profane and ungodly babblings . . . saying that the resurrection is past' (2 Timothy 2, 16). The corruptible and mortal that is our present body, condemned to death by sin, is precisely the thing that rises again. 'It is sown in corruption: it shall rise in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour; it shall rise in glory. It is sown in weakness: it shall rise in power. It is sown a natural body: it shall rise a spiritual body.' (1 Cor. 15, 43-44.) Christ, he teaches, will so clothe the body of our corruption in glory, that 'the dead shall rise again incorruptible' (1 Cor. 15, 52). The fulfilment of this, the triumph of the life-giving Spirit, lies in the future. It is when Christ comes again that we shall all indeed rise again (1 Cor. 15, 51). 'The hour cometh, wherein all that are in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of God, And they that have done good things shall come forth unto resurrection of life: but they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of the judgment' (John 5, 29).

The fact that we cannot imagine or conceive what glorified organic existence implies, does not alter the dogmatic truth that the effects of the resurrection of Christ reach out towards all men, redeeming their very being for himself. In effect man's being is drawn towards God in Christ. To rise, he must die. He must die a physical death, and if his rising is not to be simply that of flesh that is unregenerate and rebellious, he must die in spirit. Pride, isolation, self-sufficiency, must be conquered by obedience and faith. The response 'I will not serve' must be transformed into 'not my will but thy will be done'. If his rising is to be one of fulness, then it must begin in this life. The death of Christ is ours

in baptism, and so is his resurrection; the Eucharist is the food of immortality. Because it is one with Christ who is the head, the Church is made the body of resurrection. Union with Christ means conformity with him, subjection to and transformation by his power; the resurrection of the whole man.

The signs of the transformation are present in the working of the sacraments, in the lives of the Saints, but its completion waits for the coming with power, when Christ will reclaim creation for God. Death for us is a mid-point, the end and crisis of our preparation, the beginning of victory seen, of a triumph to which, at the end of time, every particle of being will have responded.

The resurrection of the body is the entry of the whole person into eternal life. To be in Christ means to live in and by the divine life of Christ so that the human being, without losing its identity, lives by Christ and is through him united to God. Since it is united to God it is given a sharing of the divine life. What does this mean? It does not simply mean that the soul is imperishable; that although the whole person dies, a part persists. It means that the souls of those who die in a state of grace are raised by the gift of glory, so strengthened by it that they see, each with different degrees of intensity, the being of God. Eternal life is the seeing of God. 'We see now through a glass in a dark manner: but then face to face. Now I know in part: but then I shall know even as I am known'. (1 Cor. 13, 12.) 'Eternal rest', prays the Christian, 'give unto them, O Lord: may they rest in peace.' Because we cannot imagine eternal life or rest our own words trip us. We recoil from the thought of endless repetition or perpetual relaxation. But this is to give a trivial interpretation to teaching which points towards communing and personal existence before God, which will be a knowing and a loving whose beauty, whose fascinations of interest, are beyond our conception. It is a bursting through to a new existence, not the indefinite prolongation of the more prudent aspects of this. It may be that we cannot conceive of human activity which is both good and non-trivial, both pure and unborning, but that is because our life of faith and grace is not dominant. The saints are turned towards death with hope, not because they renounce God's creation, but because they know they can only discover it as it is, in him. Nothing Christ has touched is left unredeemed, but

everything is transmuted by the glory of his victory.

Faith, though dark, none the less gives an interpretation of history. This is seen as a continuous historical process ruled by the divine plan. Of this process points of time are important for salvation, which is not secured in some non-temporal experience (if indeed that makes sense). God chooses the times and with the flow from Creation to the last Coming he has appointed a critical mid-point. Once this has been achieved we live in the last age, expecting the restoration of all things in Christ.

This conception implies that all activity in time, as well as all physical activity, is relevant for eternal life. In fact such activity reveals the relation of the human being to God and is a real preparation for judgment.

The Christian Creed asserts that God has provided an interpretation of life and of values which is relevant for a future after death. The facts it points to and the demand it enunciates are significant in the sense that they are of critical importance. This is no matter of safe rules for securing pie in the sky; it bears upon man's relationship to his Creator. It means that God has addressed men. It maintains that a witness to God is carried on in the world, that Christ is always here now, in his Church, a scandal, a stumbling-block, a Mediator and a Saviour.

To this the Christian says Amen: verily. It stands firm because of the faithfulness of God, his rocklike firmness in which our soul trusts.

'Fear not. I am the First and the Last. And alive and was dead. And behold I am living for ever and ever and have the keys of heaven and of hell.' (Apoc. 1, 17.)