

THE SOLEMNITY OF SOLEMNITIES

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THE work of our salvation is a unity. As the creed of the mass proclaims, it was for us men and for our salvation that Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, came down from heaven; was made flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary; and was made man. Within that same context of 'for us men and for our salvation', the creed goes on to place the other mysteries of Christ: his passion, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation. The trend of recent study¹ of the mystery of Christ's resurrection is to see this mystery within the unity of the work of salvation. This does not mean that the apologetical value of the resurrection is minimized, nor that the necessary distinctions that are made in soteriology between the various mysteries of Christ, especially between his passion and resurrection, are to be discarded. But it does mean that we do not get the full understanding of the resurrection until we see it as a saving mystery; indeed, as *the* saving mystery. The passion, death, and burial, lead up to the resurrection, which is the climax of those mysteries; and the ascension and exaltation are the mysteries that crown the resurrection. It is with good reason that the Church in the Roman martyrology calls the celebration of Christ's resurrection the Solemnity of Solemnities.

What the Church proclaims in the creed, the resurrection as a saving mystery, is also manifested to us in the liturgy of the Easter vigil.² The purpose of this article is to consider in the light of the Easter vigil the resurrection of Christ as the saving mystery. To this end use will be made of the biblical category of salvation history, and of the theological category of the instrumental efficient cause used by God in the execution of the plan of salvation. The article falls into two sections: the resurrection and salvation history; the resurrection and the Church.

I. *The resurrection and salvation history*

By salvation history is understood the revelation that God made

¹ Cf. F. X. Durrwell, *La Resurrection de Jésus Mystère de Salut* (2), Le Puy-Paris, 1954. *Christus Victor Mortis* (Collection of studies), Rome, 1958.

² The English version of the Easter Vigil is quoted from *The Masses of Holy Week and the Easter Vigil*, by G. L. Diekmann, Longmans, London, 1957.

of 'his loving design, centred in Christ, to give history its fulfilment by resuming everything, all that is in heaven, all that is in earth, summed up in him' (Eph. i, 9-10). This design of God, 'for it is he who is at work everywhere, carrying out the designs of his will' (Eph. i, 11), concerning as it does the hidden purpose of his will, is manifested to us by means of divine signs, those gracious interventions of God in our world, which are recorded in scripture, and which together make up salvation history.

Like all history, salvation history is marked by a progression; as St Paul says: 'In old days, God spoke to our fathers in many ways and by many means, through the prophets; now at last in these times he has spoken to us with a Son to speak for him' (Heb. i, 1-2). And like all history, salvation history has its consummation, 'that mighty exercise of power which he (God) shewed when he raised Christ from the dead' (Eph. i, 19-20). Christ's resurrection is the divine sign with which God closes the revelation to us of salvation history. It is the manifestation, in all its fulness, of the 'surpassing virtue there is in his (God's) dealing with us, who believe' (Eph. i, 18-19). The resurrection is the *dénouement* of that long series of divine signs that stretches back through the chosen people, Moses, and Abraham, to the dawn of our race; on it all those earlier signs depend for their ultimate meaning: 'If Christ be not risen . . . you are still in your sins' (I Cor. xv, 18).

In this context of divine signs Christ himself, according to the gospels, introduced his resurrection. His reply to some of the scribes and Pharisees, who wanted to see a sign from him, contained a hidden reference to his resurrection, and precisely as a sign. 'The only sign that will be given is the sign of the prophet Jonas. Jonas was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea-beast, and the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' (Matt. xii, 39-40). The gospel of St John, with its special interest in divine signs and man's response to them in faith, gives prominence to Christ's resurrection as the divine sign that marks the passage from the old dispensation of the law to the new dispensation of grace. Already in his understanding of the miracle at the wedding-feast at Cana, in Galilee, John sees that miracle as a divine sign that the old order is to give way to the new.³ And that is the setting in which he gives his account of

3 Cf. O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, p. 70.

Christ driving the merchants and money-changers from the temple. This time, however, the action of Christ is challenged: 'What sign canst thou shew us as thy warrant for doing this?' Christ's reply is by way of a hidden reference to his resurrection: 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again', words St John is careful to clarify by adding: 'But the temple he was speaking of was his own body; and when he had risen from the dead his disciples remembered his saying this...' (John ii, 18-22).

What is adumbrated in the gospels, is obvious in the Acts of the Apostles; here the resurrection of Christ is proclaimed as the word of God, as the divine sign. Indeed it was in terms of that sign that the apostles saw themselves: 'the witnesses whom God had appointed beforehand' (Acts x, 41). For 'teaching the multitude and proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead' (Acts iv, 2) Peter and John were put into prison. On their release, 'they went back to their company . . . uttered prayer to God with one accord . . . ; Lord, now as of old, enable thy servants to preach thy word confidently, by stretching out thy hand to heal . . .' (Acts iv, 23-24, 29-30). That prayer did not go unanswered, for 'great was the power with which the apostles testified to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts iv, 33). As the apostles saw it, the whole of their preaching depended on their testimony to the resurrection: 'if Christ has not risen, then our preaching is groundless . . . worse still, we are convicted of giving false testimony about God; we bore witness that he had raised Christ up from the dead' (I Cor. xv, 14-15).

From the time of the apostles onwards, the Church has continued to testify to Christ's resurrection, not simply as a fact of history—the third day he rose again; nor just as a miracle, even *the* miracle, by which 'Jesus of Nazareth was a man duly accredited to us from God' (Acts ii, 22); but as the final sign by which God consummates salvation history. As Israel's delivery from Egypt was the divine sign which gave meaning to the epoch of salvation history that is under the law, and on that sign rested the faith and religious life of Israel; so the faith and religious life of the Church, and the significance of the present epoch of salvation history, rests on the divine sign that is Christ's resurrection.

II. *The resurrection and the Church*

The association of the Church with the risen Christ, particularly

as this is manifested to us in the restored liturgy of the Easter vigil, is another way in which the unity of the mysteries of Christ can be seen. The unity which is apparent when the resurrection is considered within the context of salvation history is celebrated in the liturgy of light with which the Easter vigil begins. Here is seen the association of the Church with the risen Christ as the divine sign which reveals the accomplishment of God's merciful saving plan. In the rites of the blessing of the new fire, the paschal candle, the procession with lighted candles, and the Easter song, the risen Christ reveals to his Church the work accomplished by God in his resurrection, and together with his Church, in the 'solemn oblation of the candle wrought by the labour of bees', praises God for the mighty work of our salvation. This moment in the liturgical life of the Church marks the renewal of her association with the risen Christ as the divine sign. The testimony that in his physical body Christ bears to the saving work of God he seeks to bear also in the faith of his mystical body in the resurrection as the divine sign by which the history of salvation is consummated. By his dynamic presence in these rites of the liturgy of light Christ makes his Church the body of the resurrection⁴; there is solidarity between him and his Church in this aspect of the resurrection as the divine sign. The decree establishing the restored rite of the celebration of holy week reminds us of the special sacramental power and efficacy that these rites possess to foster the Christian life. To bear witness to the fact that in the resurrection of Christ 'the figures of the law and the truths of faith give way to the eternity of glory' (St Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, III, 53, ii, c) is an essential element of the Christian life.

There is another association of the Church with the risen Christ which is celebrated in the second part of the Easter vigil, the baptismal liturgy. The Church is here symbolized by the font: 'O Lord, look upon the face of thy Church and multiply in her thine acts of regeneration'. As the climax of the rites which accompany the blessing of the font, the paschal candle is lowered into the font and raised out again; three times the rite is repeated by way of emphasis. In these rites the risen Christ renews the association of the Church with his mysteries, especially with the mysteries of his death and resurrection. Here is manifested the mystery of the Church. 'On the cross the Church, like a new Eve,

4 Cf. *The Body*, by J. A. T. Robinson. Ch. 3, 'The Body of the Resurrection'.

or mother of all the living, was born from the Saviour's side' (Pius XII, *Mystical Body of Christ*, par. 27); now through the risen Christ associating her with his mysteries, she becomes the means used by him in the distribution of the divine fruits of redemption. The problem is to see the nature of this association, and what further light it throws upon the mystery of the resurrection.

To understand Christ's resurrection as the divine sign which inaugurates the final epoch of salvation history, opens up the way to other aspects of that mystery; for when salvation history reaches its fulfilment with Christ, the signs used by God to manifest his saving will become effective signs, they realize what they signify. The mysteries of Christ are saving mysteries because they work our salvation.

The principal efficient cause of our salvation is God, of whom the psalmist says: 'with thee is the fountain of life' (Ps. xxxv, 10). And the way God chose to accomplish his saving work after the obstacle created by the sin of Adam was the redemptive incarnation. The consequence of this is that Christ's humanity is the instrument of the godhead in the work of our salvation. Taking up the teaching of Leo the Great, St Thomas says: 'while there are two natures in Christ . . . yet each communicates its action to the other, in so far as the human nature is the instrument of the divine action, and the human action receives power from the divine nature' (*Summa Theologica*, III, 43, ii, c). As the instrumental efficient cause used by the godhead the resurrection is a saving mystery together with all the other mysteries of Christ. 'It (Christ's resurrection) is the efficient cause (of our resurrection) inasmuch as Christ's humanity, according to which he rose again, is as it were the instrument of his godhead, and works by his power. And therefore, just as all other things which Christ did and endured are profitable to our salvation through the power of the godhead, so also is Christ's resurrection the efficient cause of ours through the divine power whose office it is to quicken the dead' (III. 56. i. ad 3). In connection with the passion and resurrection St Thomas says: 'Considered on the part of their efficacy, which is dependent on the divine power, both Christ's death and his resurrection are the cause both of the destruction of death and of the renewal of life' (III. 56. i. ad 4).

In the life of Christ there were saving actions of which his

human nature was the principal efficient cause; such were the actions by which he made satisfaction for sin and merited our salvation. Since these actions were done by Christ during his earthly life, before he entered into the glory of his resurrection, their saving efficacy is not to be attributed to the resurrection. But the satisfactory and meritorious actions of Christ concerned rather the approach of mankind to God; they were the actions by which Christ disposed mankind for the reception of the divine gift of salvation through the destruction of death and the renewal of life. It is from this angle of our salvation as the gift of God that it is significant to speak of all the mysteries of Christ, from the incarnation to the exaltation, being the instrumental efficient cause of our salvation.

It is customary to use this category of the instrumental efficient cause in the context of the effects of salvation: grace and glory, and the resurrection of the body. But in this context the dichotomy, passion—resurrection, is not necessarily resolved, since it might be said that the passion is the instrumental efficient cause of grace in the order of objective redemption, whereas the resurrection operates as such a cause in the order of subjective redemption⁵. However, if the category of instrumental efficient cause is put in the more general context of salvation history, it does serve to emphasize the intrinsic unity of the passion and resurrection: together they are the instrument used by the godhead in the work of our salvation, the one divine power is operative in them both. This does not mean that the two mysteries are to be confused; rather they are to be seen as manifesting the dialectic or internal movement of the one saving plan.

This dialectic of the saving plan was foreshadowed in the earlier epochs of salvation history: the divine judgment on Egypt leading to the salvation of the Israelites; the exile and return, which is the prophetic interpretation of the divine events marking the disappearance of the monarchy; and the sufferings and glory of the servant of Yahweh. By reference to this dialectic St Peter preaches the mysteries of the passion and resurrection: 'This man (Jesus of Nazareth) you have put to death; by God's fixed design and foreknowledge, he was betrayed to you. . . . But God raised him up again' (Acts ii, 23-24). In the same way St Paul sees the death of

⁵ Briefly, objective redemption means the work of Christ by which he merited, or achieved our redemption; subjective redemption means the receiving of Christ's merits and achievements by the redeemed.—*Editor*.

Christ: 'None of the rulers of this world could read his (God's) secret, or they would not have crucified him to whom all glory belongs' (I Cor. ii, 8). The judgment of God on Satan, sin, and death, is the salvation of mankind, and the instrument used by God in that work is the death and resurrection of Christ. With the resurrection the wisdom and power of God in the work of our salvation, and the part played, as the instrumental efficient cause, by Christ in his human nature is fully revealed: 'God, who on this day through thy only-begotten Son hath vanquished death and unlocked for us the gate to everlasting life' (Collect of the mass for Easter). As the resurrection is the ultimate sign of salvation history, so it is the final saving mystery which consummates the divine plane of salvation.

The association of the Church with the risen Christ renewed in the liturgy of the baptismal service of the Easter vigil reveals the resurrection as the saving mystery; for this association shows that the Church herself is a saving mystery. This moment of the liturgical life of the Church makes known to us 'the beauty, the endowments, and the glory of mother Church, to whom, after God, we owe everything' (Pius XII, *Mystical Body*, par. 3). She is not only the beneficiary of the fruits of Christ's redemption; through her union with Christ, cemented in his blood, she becomes, like him but in an analogous manner, the instrumental efficient cause of salvation in the order of subjective redemption. The saving power of God is operative in her. So the prayer which accompanies the lowering of the paschal candle into the font: 'May the power of the Holy Spirit come down into this full font. And may he make the whole substance of this water pregnant with power to regenerate.' In this way, too, the Church becomes the body of the resurrection; by reason of her solidarity with the risen Christ, the effective sign of salvation, she shows forth in this world the virtue of the resurrection. To her faith there is added, in the power of the Holy Spirit, her life of association in the saving mysteries of the risen Christ.

The offices of the Easter vigil close with the celebration of the eucharistic liturgy: the culmination in this world of the Church's association with the risen Christ. At all its stages, salvation history shows that after the tension of that history is resolved, comes the moment for the grateful recognition in thanksgiving and praise of the mighty work of God. The risen Christ associates his Church

with the eternal thanksgiving and praise which he offers for the work of salvation accomplished in his mysteries. In the eucharistic liturgy of the Easter vigil there is celebrated the solemn renewal of this association. This solidarity with the risen Christ in his praise and thanksgiving further enhances the beauty of mother Church, making her still more the body of the resurrection.

But the celebration of the eucharistic liturgy is not only the sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise, it is also the sacrament in which the risen Christ is present as the food which nourishes the life of the Church. For while this world lasts, the Church lives the tension of salvation history: there is victory for her, but it is victory by way of conflict; there is newness of life, but it is the life of grace, not of glory. To meet this situation of the Church, to enable her to move to the term of her salvation history, the risen Christ gives himself in the sacrament of the eucharist.

In the light of the Easter vigil, the eucharist as sacrifice and as sacrament is seen as that which intensifies the association of the Church with the risen Christ through union with his saving mysteries. Supposing the initial association renewed in the blessing of the baptismal font, it looks forward to the consummation which will take place at the *parousia*⁶. Then the risen Christ will associate his Church with those mysteries which crown his resurrection: his ascension and exaltation. He will transform her sharing in eternal life by way of grace into the full participation that comes about through glory and the resurrection of the body. Similarly, he will take the Church fully into the mystery of his exaltation by making her victory over Satan, sin, and death, a victory which is by way of dominion. To that supreme moment the eucharist looks forward; it is both a thanksgiving and an appeal: 'The Spirit and my bride bid me come' (Apoc. xxii, 17).

It is customary to think of celebrating Easter in terms of 'duties'—the paschal confession and communion. But with the restored liturgy of holy week with its climax in the Easter vigil, the Church seeks to put that juridical celebration (as it may be called) into its liturgical setting. The liturgy makes Christ present 'as the mystical head whose living members we are and whose life we live' (Pius XII, *Christian Worship*, par. 174). In the liturgical celebration of the Easter vigil Christ is present in the fulness of the mystery of his resurrection: as the final sign of salvation history,

⁶ *Parousia* means the second coming of Christ.—*Editor*.

as the one who accomplishes that history, and as associating his Church with him in his resurrection. Participation in the Easter vigil enables us to see what the saving plan of God is, how it was accomplished, and how we share in it. Here the will of God and the instrument used by God, the mysteries of Christ and his Church, are seen in their unity: the risen Christ is this unity. Not without reason is Easter called the 'heart of the liturgy' and the solemnity of solemnities.



THE SERVANT VOCATION

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IN sacred scripture, to be God's servant is to be God's friend. The servant is someone especially chosen, especially loved. God *prefers* him to others. He is 'my servant'. There is a wonderful sense of intimacy and belonging in that possessive 'my'. God chooses his servants with a spontaneity and freedom which we see reflected in our own choice of friends. And to be chosen is to belong. We are no longer our own. We are committed to another. The choice is not only one of love but of demand. To be a friend is to be someone of whom a great deal may be asked. God's servant is always someone from whom God feels free to ask for more, much more, than other men.

Sacred scripture bears constant, unswerving witness to this fact. Intimacy with Yahweh means demands by Yahweh. If he chooses someone to be his servant it will inevitably follow that he will have something to ask of them, a task, a mission, an assignment. Indeed, the closer the friendship, the more difficult the task. Abraham certainly knew what it 'cost' to be God's friend as he made his way up the mountain, Isaac by his side. So did 'a servant of mine called Job', sitting like refuse on the dung-hill. Did not Moses and all the prophets after him try to beg off from Yahweh's choice of them, sensing even in the beginnings of their