

## **"Why did Christ have to suffer and die on the Cross?"**

**March 2024 Lent Talk for St Thomas of Canterbury, Sevenoaks**

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When I told the brethren in Oxford the question that was being posed tonight, they laughed at the enormity of the task, because of the theological complexity of the question and the range of opinions that have been proposed and argued over the centuries, and a French brother who is doing his second doctorate with us rightly said the question would require a full seminary course to answer! So, I hope you have cleared up twenty weeks in your diary - we'll be finished on time for St Dominic's day in August!

Let's start with the Catechism, and let us ask why Christ has to become man and redeem us at all. The answer, of course, is because of sin, our own personal sins. The Catechism says: "In her Magisterial teaching of the faith and in the witness of her saints, the Church has never forgotten that 'sinners were the authors and the ministers of all the sufferings that the divine Redeemer endured.' We must regard as guilty all those who continue to relapse into their sins. Since our sins made the Lord Christ suffer the torment of the cross, those who plunge themselves into disorders and crimes crucify the Son of God anew in their hearts (for he is in them) and hold him up to contempt. And it can be seen that our crime in this case is greater in us than in the Jews. As for them, according to the witness of the Apostle, 'None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.' We, however, profess to know him. And when we deny him by our deeds, we in some way seem to lay violent hands on him. Nor did demons crucify him; it is you who have crucified him and crucify him still, when you delight in your vices and sins." (CCC 598, citing the Roman catechism).

For what is the effect of sin? Sin offends the goodness and wisdom of God, because it also wounds the dignity of man; it is an abuse of God's gift of freedom to us; it is a conscious choice for lesser created goods which are perishable and transient in preference to the eternal God and his wise ordering of things - a rejection of God's will for all that pertains to our eternal good, and our true and lasting happiness. CCC 1850 says: "Sin is an offense against God... Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become 'like gods,' knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus 'love of oneself even to contempt of God.' In this proud self-exaltation, sin is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus, which achieves our salvation." So, we begin to see sketched out the way in which Christ, by his obedience and self-humbling, does for sinners all that we have failed to do. Or as the (old) Baltimore Catechism put it: "We cannot see the harm sin does to our soul, but studying the crucifix will help us to realize it: Our sins did that to him." (cf CCC 1851)

So, to use the language of Scripture in the parables, sin incurs a debt, that is to say, we owe God the obedience that is due to his goodness and providence; the love that is due as a response to his love in creating us and giving us life and all that is; the worship and honour that is due to him in justice. But by sinning, man has not given God his due, and moreover has offended his goodness and wisdom, and so he has incurred a debt. Looking at this metaphysically, we say that sin is a privation of a good, that is to say, it is a fundamental lack of a certain goodness; the sinful acts we commit are not as full of goodness as they should be. How can we make up this lack? When the one who is offended is infinite in goodness, it is impossible for us with our own human capacity to make up that lack. In other words, we cannot repay the debt owed. So, Jesus says in his parable: "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents... [But] out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt." (Matt 18:23-27) That is the scale of our debt which is owed to God.

The problem is, it seems as though God can just forgive the debt – he can simply write off the sin, after all, he is so infinitely rich, it will not 'harm' him. But that is to see sin and forgiveness merely as an accounting fudge, of having no real effect. It underestimates the gravity of sin. Rather, the Catechism says that "Sin is an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law (St. Augustine, *Faust* 22:PL 42, 418). It is an offense against God. It rises up against God in a disobedience contrary to the obedience of Christ." (CCC 1871) So, God cannot just write off sin, but rather the debt that has been incurred, that which is lacking, must be restored and repaired and made whole again. The justice of God demands this, for if God simply forgives the debt, he would not be a just God.

We often have problems with this because in our way of thinking, we should just 'forgive and forget'. But merely forgetting doesn't redress injustice, doesn't protect from further harm, doesn't heal and teach the offender to do better. Just forgetting says that in fact the sin or the wrong done does not really matter because no harm has been done. But we know that this leads to moral and societal chaos, and it is simply not truthful. Because the fact is that evil done does have a consequence for us personally, and also communally; sin does incur a debt because it offends the justice and goodness of God. Therefore, although God forgives the sin, nevertheless satisfaction must be done, which means that the lack but be supplied, the debt must be paid. But we cannot pay the price of our sins. So God becomes Man, in the person of Jesus Christ; the Second Person of the Trinity - who is always God and always united with though distinct from the Father - is Incarnate, so that as Man he can pay the debt incurred by Mankind, but he does this as God so that the repayment that he makes has an eternal value, and has an ongoing effect for all time and for people in every generation.

So, what is the act of repayment? Jesus freely chooses to suffer the Passion and to die on the Cross, to become a victim of Man's sins. As the Catechism says: "It is precisely in the Passion, when the mercy of Christ is about to vanquish it, that sin most clearly manifests its violence and its many forms: unbelief, murderous hatred, shunning and mockery by the leaders and the people, Pilate's cowardice and the cruelty of the soldiers, Judas' betrayal - so bitter to Jesus, Peter's denial and the disciples' flight. However, at the very hour of darkness, the hour of the prince of this world, the sacrifice of Christ secretly becomes the source from which the forgiveness of our sins will pour forth inexhaustibly." (CCC 1851)

Now, this is just setting the scene. Because the question that is asked is *why* did Jesus have to suffer? In other words, was this kind of bloody repayment *necessary*? And what is the sense, so to speak, in such violence, and in the death of this truly Innocent One?

I think we need to be clear, first of all, that the theory known as penal substitution, although it seems to make sense of certain lines of Scripture, is problematic and heretical. Calvin, who was trained in law, adopts an overly legal approach to the question because he sees sin as a crime that incurs a punishment. But Christ is punished in our stead, and so the Father "pours his wrath", or satisfies his rage, by letting the Son be killed. In this way of thinking the Son is the victim of our sins, but he is also the one who is unjustly treated by men and by God. For if he is innocent, Calvin (and Luther) say that God sees him as guilty. But the injustice of sin can't be redressed by unjustly punishing Christ. Such a God, punishing the innocent, pretending the innocent is sinful, would not be a just God, still less a loving or merciful God!

So, instead of penal substitution, the Catholic doctrine of the atonement, which is advanced by St Thomas Aquinas, uses the language of debt, which if you like, is taken from the law of torts rather than criminal law! Christ, then pays the debt for us, satisfying the debt of love, loving obedience, and of conformity to the Father's goodness that we owed to God. Christ, who as God is infinite in his love, more than makes up in his own self-offering on the Cross, all that is lacking in our love. Or to put it another way, Christ's loving obedience is more pleasing to God than the displeasure that our sin causes. This is called "vicarious substitution". It is vital, though, to see that God the Father doesn't inflict the Cross on God the Son, but rather, the Son knows from the beginning that he has come to offer himself up on the Cross for our salvation. Christ does this out of love for the Father whose justice has been offended and must be satisfied, and also out of love for sinful humanity, who has offended God but cannot satisfy the lack that has been caused by sin.

This motivation of divine love that leads to the Incarnation and Passion and Death of Christ the divine Word of God is vital. For then, what Christ knows is known through his divine knowledge, and what is known can be freely and genuinely willed, and only what we know and will can be done with love. For it is a key Thomistic axiom that love follows on from knowledge. If, as some have thought, Christ did not know his divine mission, or did not know that he is God, and therefore did not know his identity, then he went to the Cross, not as a willing sacrifice but as a foolish victim. No, love has to be consciously willed and freely chosen. For then, love turns suffering into sacrifice; love turns pain into Passion, which is redemptive. Christ knowingly and freely offers himself as a sacrifice for sin, and he knows the value of his sacrifice because he knows he is God. Nor can we posit that Christ was somehow reluctant (perhaps at Gethesemane) and then he relents or is made to do so by the Father. The problem with this kind of idea is that we then we don't take the unique reality of the hypostatic union into account. St Thomas, therefore, says: "Christ as God delivered Himself up to death by the same will and action as that by which the Father delivered Him up; but as man He gave Himself up by a will inspired of the Father. Consequently there is no contrariety in the Father delivering Him up and in Christ delivering Himself up." (ST IIIa q47 a3 ad 2)

Returning, then to the question I asked: Was the Passion and Cross necessary? St Thomas answers that it is not strictly necessary in the sense that there is no other way. Neither was it necessary in the sense that Christ was forced to do so. But it is necessary "from necessity of the end proposed", which is to redeem us of our sin and to repair the damage caused by sin to mankind and to our relationship with God. (ST IIIa q46 a1) What does this mean, 'necessity of the end proposed'? The argument that St Thomas uses, which was common in the Middle Ages, but which is less well-known these days is the argument from fittingness (*convenientia*). This means that God does what is fitting to the circumstances and end according to his own all-good wisdom. We tend to struggle with this because, being sinful and willful especially in these days, we doubt the wisdom of God and we wonder if there can't be a better way to deliver Mankind from sin - just write it off by *Fiat* perhaps, which is basically voluntarism without regard for justice or the divine logic of salvation.

Therefore St Thomas gives an argument from fittingness. The text is a little work written in 1264 in Orvieto, called *De rationibus fidei contra Saracenos, Graecos et Armenos ad Cantorem Antiochenum*, a short but beautifully succinct defence of Christian faith against Muslim objections. So, he begins in question 7 on 'The meaning of 'The Word of God suffered', saying: "if someone objects that, since God is almighty, he could have saved the human race otherwise than by the death of his only-begotten Son, such a person ought to observe that in God's deeds we must consider what was the most fitting way of acting, even if he could have acted otherwise; otherwise we will be faced with this question in everything he made. Thus if it is asked why God made the heaven

of a certain size and why he made the stars in such a number, a wise thinker will look for what was fitting for God to do, even if he could have done otherwise. I say this supposing our belief that the whole disposition of nature and all human acts are subject to Divine Providence. Take this belief away and all worship of the Divinity is excluded... Therefore if someone considers with a pious intention the fittingness of the suffering and death of Christ, he will find such a depth of knowledge that any time he thinks about it he will find more and greater things, so that he can experience as true what the Apostle says (1 Cor 1:23-24): "We are preaching a crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the gentiles foolishness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is both the power of God and the wisdom of God." He continues (v. 25): 'God's folly is wiser than human wisdom.'" So, here is a call for humility when doing theology - if we seek to understand divine mysteries, we must begin by dealing with the reality we find, not challenging the truth of things; modern men are often puffed up with pride and like to challenge God.

Considering the second part of the question, *why the Cross*, why such suffering? How is it fitting, and what is the end which befits the Cross? St Thomas explains how the Cross and indeed the life that Christ lived fittingly befits our salvation, as a remedy for the motivations of our soul that leads to sin.

I will now read to you almost all of St Thomas's explanation in Q7 so you can see how he argues this: "First of all, we must observe that Christ assumed a human nature to repair the fall of man, as we have said. Therefore, according to his human nature, Christ should have suffered and done whatever would serve as a remedy for sin. The sin of man consists in cleaving to bodily things and neglecting spiritual goods. Therefore the Son of God in his human nature fittingly showed by what he did and suffered that men should consider temporal goods or evils as nothing, lest a disordered love for them impede them from being dedicated to spiritual things. Thus Christ chose poor parents, although perfect in virtue, lest anyone glory in mere nobility of flesh and in the wealth of his parents. He led a poor life to teach us to despise riches. He lived without titles or office so as to withdraw men from a disordered desire for these things. He underwent labour, thirst, hunger and bodily afflictions so that men would not be fixed on pleasure and delights and be drawn away from the good of virtue because of the hardships of this life. In the end he underwent death, so that no one would desert the truth because of fear of death. And lest anyone fear a shameful death for the sake of the truth, he chose the most horrible kind of death, that of the cross. Thus it was fitting that the Son of God made man should suffer and by his example provoke men to virtue, so as to verify what Peter said (1 Pet 2:21): "Christ suffered for you, and left an example for you to follow in his steps..."

"There is a related point we should make here. The same reason of Providence which led the Son of God made man to suffer weakness in himself, let him to desire his disciples,

whom he established as ministers of human salvation, to be abject in the world. Thus he did not choose the well educated and noble, but illiterate and ignoble men, that is, poor fishermen. Sending them to work for the salvation of men, he commanded them to observe poverty, to suffer persecutions and insults, and even to undergo death for the truth; this was so that their preaching might not seem fabricated for the sake of earthly comfort, and that the salvation of the world might not be attributed to human wisdom or power, but only to God's wisdom and power. Thus they did not lack divine power to work miracles as they appeared abject according to the world. For the restoration of man it was necessary for men to learn not to trust proudly in themselves, but in God. For the perfection of human justice requires that man should subject himself totally to God, from whom he also hopes to gain every good, and should thank him for what he has received. In order to train his disciples to despise the present goods of this world and to sustain all sorts of adversity even to death, there was no better way than for Christ to suffer and die. Thus he himself told them (Jn 15:20): "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too."

Then we must observe that in the order of justice sin should be punished by a penalty. We see how cases of injustice are handled in human courts, that the judge takes from the one who has too much through grabbing what belongs to another and gives it to the one who has less. Anyone who sins over-indulges his appetite, and in satisfying it transgresses the order of reason and of divine law. For that person to be brought back to the order of justice something must be taken from what he wants; that is done by punishing him or by taking the goods he wanted to have or by imposing the bad things he refused to suffer.

This restoration of justice by penalty sometimes is done by the will of the one who is punished, when he imposes the penalty on himself so as to return to justice. Other times it is done against his will, and in that case he does not return to a state of justice, but justice is carried out in him.

The whole human race was subject to sin. To be restored to the state of justice, there would have to be a penalty which man would take upon himself in order to fulfil the order of divine justice. But no mere man could satisfy God sufficiently by accepting some voluntary punishment, even for his own sin, to say nothing of the sin of the whole human race. For when man sins he transgresses the law of God and tries, were he able, to do injury to the God of infinite majesty. The greater the person offended, the greater the crime; we see, for instance, that someone who strikes a soldier is punished more than someone who strikes a farmer, and much more if he strikes a king or prince. Therefore a sin committed against the law of God is somehow an infinite offence.

Again we must observe that the dignity of the person making reparation is also to be considered. For example, one word of a king asking for pardon of an offence is considered greater than if someone lower went on his knees and showed any other sign of humiliation to beg pardon from the one who suffered the injury. But no mere man has the infinite dignity required to satisfy justly an offence against God. Therefore there had

to be a man of infinite dignity who would undergo the penalty for all so as to satisfy fully for the sins of the whole world. Therefore the only-begotten Word of God, true God and Son of God, assumed a human nature and willed to suffer death in it so as to purify the whole human race indebted by sin. Thus Peter says (1 Pet 3:18): "Christ himself died once and for all for sins, the upright for the sake of the guilty."

Therefore it was not fitting, as Muslims think, for God to wipe away human sins without satisfaction, or even to have never permitted man to fall into sin. That would first be contrary to the order of justice, and secondly to the order of human nature, by which man has free will and can choose good or evil. God's Providence does not destroy the nature and order of things, but preserves them. So God's wisdom was most evident in his preserving the order of justice and of nature, and at the same time mercifully providing man a saving remedy in the incarnation and death of his Son."

Finally, I want to supplement this with St Thomas's teaching in the *Summa* which adds to the moral lessons of the Passion. So, in ST IIIa q46 a3 he says: "By Christ's Passion, many other things besides deliverance from sin concurred for man's salvation. In the first place, man knows thereby how much God loves him, and is thereby stirred to love Him in return, and herein lies the perfection of human salvation; hence the Apostle says (Romans 5:8): "God commended His charity towards us; for when as yet we were sinners... Christ died for us." Secondly, because thereby He set us an example of obedience, humility, constancy, justice, and the other virtues displayed in the Passion, which are requisite for man's salvation. Hence it is written (1 Pt. 2:21): "Christ also suffered for us, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps." Thirdly, because Christ by His Passion not only delivered man from sin, but also merited justifying grace for him and the glory of bliss... Fourthly, because by this man is all the more bound to refrain from sin, according to 1 Cor. 6:20: "You are bought with a great price: glorify and bear God in your body." And fifthly, so that we might know the dignity of our humanity.

Returning to *De rationibus fidei*, in his discussion on the Incarnation, St Thomas says: "The way of restoring should correspond to the nature being restored and to its sickness. The nature to be restored was man's rational nature endowed with free will, who should not be subject to exterior power but be recalled to the state of righteousness according to his own will. His sickness, being a perversity of the will, demanded that the will should be called back to righteousness. Righteousness of the human will consists in the proper ordering of love, which is its principal act. Rightly ordered love is to love God above all things as our supreme good, and to refer to him everything that we love as our ultimate goal, and to observe the proper order in loving other things by preferring spiritual to bodily goods.

To excite our love towards God, there was no more powerful way than that the Word of God, through whom all things were made, should assume our human nature in order to

restore it, so that he would be both God and man. First of all, because the strongest way God could show how much he loves man was his willing to become man for his salvation; and nothing can provoke love more than to know that one is loved...

[So] Man's knowledge of his dignity, coming from God's assuming a human nature, helps to keep him from subjecting his affections to any creature, whether by worshipping demons or any creatures through idolatry or by subjecting himself to bodily creatures through disordered affection. For if man has such a great dignity by God's judgement and he is so close to him that God wanted to become man, it is unworthy of man to subject himself improperly to things inferior to God."

Last of all, I want to address how all the above, how the virtues we learn from the Cross can have an effect in our daily lives. How, indeed, does the saving work of Christ on the Cross touch us and transform our lives now, so many years after it happened at Calvary. Because Christ is God, so the Passion can affect all of human history. Thus St Thomas says: "Christ's Passion, although corporeal, has yet a spiritual effect from the Godhead united: and therefore it secures its efficacy by *spiritual contact*---namely, by faith and the sacraments of faith".

So, for us now who have faith and who are Baptised into Christ, we can have spiritual contact with the Cross and its transforming effect through the Mass and the Sacraments. In particular, we have seen how Christ through his loving sacrifice on the Cross supplies for the lack of love that we have demonstrated by sinning. So, to counter this, the charity of Christ is aroused in us by the Holy Spirit so that, in union with Christ, as members of his Mystical Body the Church, we too might love so that our pain also becomes Passion, our sufferings also become redemptive, and so we can also partake in a small way in Christ's work of satisfaction for humanity's sins.

The Baltimore Catechism puts it like this: we share in the satisfaction that Christ makes for sin "by the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which offers to God all our actions, especially our sufferings in union with those of Christ. Our own actions, even our best ones, and our sufferings, even the worst ones we endure, could never *of themselves*, please God as much as we have hurt Him by sin. But when our actions, our sufferings, our love are all united with the actions, the sufferings, and the love of Christ, and offered up to Him in the Mass, then we can please God more than we have hurt Him by sin." In other words, when we go to Mass with good intentions, well prepared, and with the right dispositions - the attitude of Christ the Son - wanting to offer ourselves and our sufferings up to God in loving obedience to his will and surrendering to his providence and goodness, then, we can make full satisfaction for our sins through Christ. The marvel of God's mercy and love is that he should undergo the Cross and make even this much of a share in his satisfaction for our sins possible for us, through the gift of the Holy Mass which is Calvary made present for all time!