

LEARNING TO LIVE THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES IN CHRIST’S PASSION, ASCENSION, AND PENTECOST

• Jean-Pierre Batut •

“The paschal faith, faith in Christ’s passage from the crucifixion to the glory of God, is not real unless it leads to the passage of those who profess it to a wholly different way of life, in which he who was dead henceforward and forever reveals himself as living.”



Strictly speaking, as a theological virtue—i.e., one of the virtues that “relate directly to God”¹ and have “God as their origin, motivation, and end”²—faith in the proper sense cannot exist in man except on the basis of the paschal mystery. Indeed, it presupposes a radically new relationship to Christ, to God, to one’s human brothers, and to the world itself. That is why the miracle of Easter is not only that of Jesus’ resurrection, but also that of the communication of the Good News of his glorification to the men and the women who will henceforward be its witnesses. If it is legitimate to characterize this communication as a mystery, it is because it is something altogether

¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (= CCC), 1812.

²CCC, 1840.

different from the simple diffusion of information. Indeed, we may say the same of the testimony that results from it: when we see the extreme care that the New Testament texts take to relate to us the radical novelty of the transition from ignorance to knowledge of the resurrected Christ, we understand that the change the disciples underwent many centuries ago needs also to become our own experience.

If it is true that the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love “adapt man’s faculties for participation in the divine nature,” disposing Christians “to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity,”³ they presuppose that the gift of this participation was given to them in advance. The second letter of Peter, which we know is to a large extent a baptismal catechesis, does not hesitate to affirm this, in particular in the passage (which is unique in Scripture) in which we encounter the expression *θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως*, “participants in the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4). The assimilation to the divine that the wise men of antiquity sought is thus reclaimed by the Christian faith, not of course in the ascending mode of apotheosis (an elevation to the rank of the gods), but in the descending mode of filial adoption, by which the Father makes us his children by uniting us to his Son in the Spirit.

Jesus’ paschal mystery is not about his individual humanity alone: its effects unfold into all of those who are united to him by faith and baptism. The liturgical feasts of Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost, as well as the three sacraments of Christian initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist) henceforward trace out an itinerary that leads the Christian from faith to hope and from hope to love, bringing him into greater and greater conformity with the gift that was given to him in Christ’s resurrection, and which the sending of the Spirit of holiness made communicable through time and space.

Before sketching out the three stages of this itinerary, it is fitting first to define their nature. We may speak of a process of *interiorization* by which a reality that existed in itself, as something external to my life, comes gradually to exist for me and to become the very dynamism of my existence—in such a way that “in the Catholic Church, in the Eucharist, and in the union of one’s spirit with the Holy Spirit, we are contemporaries of the mystery, we

³CCC, 1812.

draw near to the mystery, we are assimilated to the mystery, . . . participating in the event, because the Holy Spirit gives us the gift of being present at it.”⁴

We will attempt in the following reflections to offer a more detailed account of this process.

1. Interior knowledge of the Resurrected Christ

In his *Grammar of Assent*, John Henry Newman presents an explanation of the theological usage he makes of the untranslatable English idiomatic word “to realize.” “To realize” is to become aware of a reality by means of the spirit’s collective powers—the intellect, of course, but also the imagination and affectivity, in such a way that this awareness gets translated into practice through decisions and behaviors that involve the person. In order to illustrate his observation, Newman takes the example of the laborious process that led in Great Britain to the abolition of slavery. Wilberforce, the advocate of abolition, undertook the task of bringing his fellow citizens from a theoretical condemnation to an effective decision, but he very quickly came to see that this transition would not come about without a determined campaign of sensibilization that aimed to “affect the imagination of men as to make their acknowledgement of that iniquitousness operative.”⁵ This example allows us to understand the true nature of “assent” according to Newman: a process, the authenticity of which can be demonstrated only by its translation into concrete acts. The sole genuine assent is one that allows a person to pass from a simple conviction that has no hold on reality to the new act that comes about as its result.

The same process of assent holds even more clearly for the realities of faith. Without appealing to the same terminology as Newman, Romano Guardini (1885–1968) explains how the truths of faith, which are initially placed *before* the believer as propositions external to him, move progressively *behind him* in order to become that on the basis of which he looks at the whole of reality, thus culminating in a “Catholic vision of the world” (*katholische Weltan-*

⁴Albert Chapelle, “Les mystères de la vie du Christ,” in *Au creux du rocher* (Brussels: Lessius, 2004), 168.

⁵Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, IV, 2.

schauung),⁶ which alone suffices to lead to choices and decisions in complete conformity with what is believed. The interiorization of the object of faith occurs in the highest degree in the relationship to the Word of God, whether written or spoken: the Word becomes in this way more alive and transformative. Who, while praying over the inspired Word, has not had the experience of this osmosis in which, as Gregory the Great so memorably put it, “Scripture grows along with the one reading it”?⁷ This growth in which the soul reveals itself in the body of the sacred text is the growth of Christ in me: the transition from the “literal meaning” to the “spiritual meaning” is not a straying into arbitrary divagations, but rather there exists between the former and latter the same relationship of sacramental continuity that exists between the humanity of Christ and the divinity that it both differs from and makes manifest at the same time.

In this way, we could say without contradiction that the access to the spiritual sense, far from being accomplished at the price of neglecting the literal sense, brings about a *growing incarnation* of the matter that is meditated upon. As Newman explains, just as certain passages from Homer or Virgil that we memorized in our youth suddenly touch us one day because our human experience allows us to discover their genuine existential import, so too a scriptural text that we have read a thousand times and understood in a “notional” way is able to transform our lives the moment we “realize” that it is speaking “precisely about realities, and not only of ideas.”⁸ Indeed, only the transformation of my life bears irrefutable witness that this process has unfolded to its end: this is what led Origen to say that “the less serious our conversion to God is, the more difficulty we will have in understanding Scripture.”⁹

Two texts that everyone knows well (perhaps too well) may help us grasp what we are talking about here. They concern the two spiritual journeys of the “disciples of Emmaus” on the one hand (Lk 24:13–35), and of Queen Candace’s eunuch on the other (Acts

⁶Cf. *Vie de la Foi*, French translation DDB 1968. The *katholische Weltanschauung* chair was created specifically for Guardini in Berlin in 1923. Forbidden by the Nazis to teach, Guardini moved his chair to Munich after World War II.

⁷Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, XX, 1.

⁸*Grammar of Assent*, IV, 2.

⁹*Homilies on Leviticus*, VI, 1.

8:26–40). These two accounts describe for us the birth of faith in Christ, and it is important to note that they do so on the basis of a situation that is marked by the impossibility of believing and by discouragement, to be sure, but which is not for all that a state of total ignorance. The revelation that God communicated to Israel is already familiar to the two “disciples of Emmaus,” who, as Jews, “have Moses and the prophets” (Lk 16:29; cf. Rom 9:4). In their case, in addition to this knowledge of the Scriptures they also happen to have an external knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ, because they were among the disciples who placed their hope for the deliverance of Israel in him (Lk 24:21). Nevertheless, what was lacking in this twofold knowledge was the essential dimension to which Newman’s and Guardini’s observations have brought our attention, and which St. Augustine summarizes thus: “though Life walked with them, it had not yet entered into their heart.”

In an analogous way, in the account of the meeting between Philip and Queen Candace’s eunuch (Acts 8), we discover a man to whom the Scriptures are not altogether foreign: indeed, he is one of those “God-fearers” who, though not belonging to the Jewish people, already gives homage to the God of Israel (cf. 8:27). In contrast to the two disciples of Emmaus, this man is possessed by an immense expectation: he obstinately knocks on the door of the Scriptures, even if for him they still remain a sealed book. And yet this man, in reading the prophet Isaiah, does not manage to discern Christ in the figure of the suffering servant. What he lacks is the providential guidance that will give him the hermeneutical key to the oracle of the servant in response to the question that is both simple and full of pathos: “*of whom* is he speaking?” It is then that the Holy Spirit brings Philip into the situation—and, through him, the Church of Christ: “Philip thus spoke and, starting with this text of Scripture, proclaimed to him the Good News of Jesus” (8:35).

The disciples of Emmaus and the eunuch of Candace come together here in a paradoxical situation: they make use of Scriptures even while being incapable of attaining the One of whom the Scriptures speak. Like the spirit of the two disciples, though for different reasons, the spirit of the eunuch is “without understanding” [*sans intelligence*], in the sense of the term according to its Latin etymology: it is not capable of “reading *in*,” or better, reading *from* the inside that which concerns the Lord Jesus.

2. *The paschal faith is achieved in hope and charity*

It is easy to see that the resurrected Christ and Philip after him carry out a hermeneutical work that is altogether different from a mere explication of texts: without disrupting continuity, the Word ends with the dispensation of a paschal sacrament—the Eucharist in the first case and Baptism in the second case—in which, once more, the Word is made flesh. According to the definition that St. Augustine offers, a sacrament is, moreover, nothing other than a “word made visible”¹⁰: visible, i.e., accessible, concrete, and tangible, to the point of occurring as an event of salvation for the one who receives it. This is what takes place here, where everything happens “as if the paschal reconciliation and communion were necessary in order to attain to the generosity of the spirit and of the letter.”¹¹

The fact that the two disciples and the eunuch experience a decisive event is shown to us in a sober and explicit way through the “burning heart” of the former and the “joy” of the latter. What is at issue here is not just any sort of joy, but the joy of being *saved* (cf. Ps 51:14)—saved by being introduced into a definitive communion with Jesus himself. The idea of *configuration*, which is a classic one in sacramental theology, expresses this new reality well: “incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the person baptized is *configured* to Christ (cf. Rom 8:29).”¹² From this point forward, the paschal faith, faith in the passage of the Crucified One to the glory of God itself reaches completion in the virtue of hope: “we are members of his Body, he

¹⁰Cf. *Homily 80 on the Gospel of John*: “the word joins here with the (material) element, and it transforms into a sacrament, which is also itself as it were a word made visible” (IEA 74B [Paris: Turnhout, 1998], 68–78).

¹¹Chapelle, *Au creux du rocher*, 31.

¹²CCC, 1272. It is worth noting that the idea of being “configured to Christ” appears in the section of the CCC that deals with the sacraments in order to speak of the effect of the three sacraments of initiation (CCC, 1121, 1239) as well as the anointing of the sick by which “the sick person is . . . in a certain way *consecrated* to bear fruit by configuration to the Savior’s redemptive Passion” (CCC, 1521) and that it then reappears in order to speak of the sacrament of holy orders according to its different degrees (CCC, 1563, 1570, 1581). Thus, the word is used in reference to both the baptismal and ministerial priesthood, because both make of the recipient a being with Christ and render him capable of acting with Christ.

preceded us in the glory that he had with you, and it is there that we live in hope.”¹³

But hope in turn would be meaningless unless it led to an act of charity in conformity with one’s belonging to the resurrected Christ:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope; and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom 5:1–5)

The paschal faith, faith in Christ’s passage from the crucifixion to the glory of God, is not real unless it leads to the passage of those who profess it to a wholly different way of life, in which he who was dead henceforward and forever reveals himself as living. The intermediary time between Easter and Pentecost is for them a time of adaptation to this new life.

3. Between Ascension and Pentecost: consent to the invisible

The disciples’ adaptation to their new condition could not occur without their consenting to allow the visible form of their Savior to pass away before their fleshly eyes. What is at stake for them is supremely personal: it is a matter of accepting that the most important thing in their lives, the decisive sign of the transition they are undergoing, is at the same time something that cannot be seen. And we come to understand that they would not be able to consent to this, nor even perceive its truth, unless they had previously consented to surrendering their physical vision of Christ. For this is precisely what comes about: the two disciples of Emmaus do not express the slightest bit of regret regarding the fact that their mysterious companion “disappeared from their view,” nor did the eunuch of Candace or the Eleven themselves who, after the

¹³Preface of the feast of the Ascension.

Ascension, returned to Jerusalem (Acts 1:12). Far from being experienced as a privation, as a drama that is all the more unbearable insofar as the joy of reunion exceeded all measure, the departure turns them toward the welcoming of a presence more interior to them than they are to themselves. The knowledge of the Resurrected One is henceforward able to converge into one with the knowledge they have of their own mystery. Let us give the word one more time to a Pauline text:

From the moment that you were raised with Christ, seek the things above, there where Christ may be found, seated at the right hand of God. Keep your mind on the things above, not the things of the earth. For you have died, and *your life is henceforth hidden with Christ in God*. When the Christ comes again, he who is your life, then you too will be manifest with him full of glory. (Col 3:1–4)¹⁴

Something even greater depends on this consent to what cannot be seen: the capacity to be oneself a servant of the transition from the visible to the invisible. This is what the experiential accounts of Luke and John bear witness to when they show us the Resurrected One in the process of opening his disciples up not only to the reality of the invisible but even more to the transparency between the visible and the invisible.

This is what we see in the apparition in the upper room, which in Luke follows the episode of the disciples of Emmaus. The evangelist attempts here to have us follow to the end the series of transformations that take place in them and in the Eleven:

—Transformation by the peace of forgiveness (Lk 24:36: “Peace be with you!”);

—Transformation by the recognition that takes them away from fear and doubt (24:37–39: “Why are you troubled, and why do you have doubts in your heart?”);

—Transformation by a conversion of the joy itself (24:41–43: “since in their joy they did not yet believe. . .”);

—Transformation, once again, of their relationship to the Scriptures, in a sort of revised edition of the pedagogy of Emmaus. Curiously, this conclusive moment comes after the gesture of eating

¹⁴We could also cite the theme of the disciples not being known by the “world” in the first letter of John.

(24:43), by which Jesus just proved to them that he is not a spirit (*pneuma*, in the sense of “ghost”): this is how he opens their minds “to an understanding of the Scriptures”—a very expressive evocation of the definitive alliance between the letter and the spirit.

At this point, we have in a certain sense arrived at a place beyond appearances: a wall of separation that had been insurmountable up to now has been laid low, reduced to nothing by the Resurrected One. For the one who places his faith in him, rubble is all that remains. The only thing left is to acclimate oneself to this new condition, to this “climate of grace,” and to this liberated freedom, to dare to risk one’s steps in this garden in order to enter back into commerce with the invisible. The one who, at the dawning of time, walked “at the break of day” (Gn 3:8) is still there calling; and man, whose eyes were at that time opened to his own nakedness (Gn 3:7), now opens them for recognition (cf. Lk 24:31). Far from being stripped bare at the encounter, as he was then, “before the break of day blew and the shadows were chased away” (Song 2:17), he now calls out in turn to the Beloved, and the Beloved responds.

In the end, it is the epilogue of John’s gospel that shows us how the process of the paschal recognition ends, insofar as the appearance of Jesus on the shore of the lake does not conclude with an explicit confirmation of his being recognized by the beloved disciple (Jn 21:7): after Jesus invited them to share a meal with him, “none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ *knowing well that it was the Savior*” (21:12). The certitude of faith is henceforward beyond sensible support: it manifests itself as the same when the Lord gives himself “in a different form” (Mk 16:12), i.e., in the sacramental form, and most eminently in the form of the Eucharist.

4. The gift of love and gratitude

No matter how unshakeably firm a faith may be, it will remain “unformed” and dead to the extent that it does not unfold itself in works, that is to say, in an act of charity: “deprived of hope and love, faith does not fully unite the believer to Christ and does not make him a living member of his Body.”¹⁵ In the temporal

¹⁵CCC, 1815.

economy of the paschal mystery, this gift of love corresponds to the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, ten days after the Ascension.

The descent onto our earth of the third Person, of God's ultimate Gift, is simply the counterpart to the glorified Son's ascent to the Father. The heavens are henceforward "open" (Acts 7:56), and we are given the gift of being able to penetrate them and sound their depths. This wrenching open brings to completion the event of knowledge according to the spirit, which, in contrast to knowledge according to the flesh, belongs to those who have attained the new creation—and such an event can occur only within the order of love:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh; even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. (2 Cor 5:15–17)

At the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius proposes to the exercitant the "contemplation to attain the love of God," which ends with a contemplation of creation, or, more precisely, of *God* in creation, for the goal of this contemplation is not to turn one's attention to created things, but rather to regard God present in them: "This is to reflect on how God dwells in creatures: in elements giving them existence, in plants giving them life, in the animals conferring upon them sensation, in man bestowing understanding. So He dwells in me and gives me being, life, sensation, intelligence; and makes a temple of me."¹⁶ Further on, he proposes "to consider how God works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth."¹⁷

¹⁶*The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951), 102.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 103.

It is clear that such a consideration presupposes that one has passed through the whole of the paschal mystery. This is the only way that creation as a whole is able to be understood as, and to proclaim itself to be, Love, not in the sense in which creation would be confused with love, but in the sense in which it is not intelligible except insofar as I contemplate it as love. In this contemplation, the philosophical astonishment in the face of being is transposed into theological admiration in the face of self-giving love. We are also quite far here from the cry of bewilderment from the first Week at the end of the meditation on sin (“How is it that [the creatures of the world] have permitted me to live and sustained me in life!”¹⁸). The astonishment of every man before the cosmos, and the sinner’s bewilderment before the holiness of God who nevertheless keeps him alive, yield their place to the gratitude of the man redeemed and the sinner forgiven, who discovers that he is capable of reciprocity.

Thus, “contemplation does not obliterate action but rather gives rise to it, like a fruit, a seal, a pledge, a gift, a thanksgiving [*eucharistie*].”¹⁹ The determination of freedom is therefore no longer perceived as an impossible choice between two conflicting goods—either God or me—but one’s sacrifice is henceforward nothing but the natural consequence of the “intimate knowledge of the many blessings received, that filled with gratitude for all, I may in all things love and serve the Divine Majesty.”²⁰ There remains nothing else for the exercitant than, in the *Suscipe* prayer, to ask God to “take” what he himself has “given,” and, in this restitution of itself by freedom, to “give” his love and his grace, by which the exercitant is sufficiently rich in being fully free.²¹

We see how much the “new creation” does not annihilate the first creation, but rather presupposes and assumes it into a consent to being that gives one the ability to receive it anew and indeed to receive oneself anew in it. “Freedom discovers itself gathered up again and as it were given to itself in these achievements

¹⁸Ibid., 30.

¹⁹Chapelle, *Au creux du rocher*, 48.

²⁰*Spiritual Exercises*, 101.

²¹“Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given all to me. To Thee, O Lord, I return it. All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to Thy will. Give me Thy love and Thy grace, for this is sufficient for me” (*Spiritual Exercises*, 102).

whose tangible evidences and physical certainties lie in faith, hope, and love. . . . In faith, the elements of the world appear as they are in truth: pledges of the glory of God and promissory notes of our resurrection.”²²

We give the last word, not to enthusiasm, but to the ordinariness of everyday life, which is the true incarnation of love. The time of Easter is followed by ordinary time, in which the Word comes back to us to establish his dwelling within us in our day to day living, in the humility of daily tasks and the density of a Word—a Word we know to be the Word of life, but which each one of us is required to carry in the half-light of faith so that the Word may arrive in the moment and manner that God wishes, along a paschal path, the successive steps of which we have to walk over and over again without ceasing.

The Church and Christians are not permitted to come to a definitive rest in the Triduum of Easter; their place lies neither on this side nor on that, but only on both sides of the cross: they are sent from one position (to which they may not attach themselves) to the other, back and forth without ceasing. But this is not an untenable see-saw game, because the Unique One (the Christ) is the identity of the cross and resurrection, and because Christian and ecclesial existence is expropriated in him.²³

The joy of Easter itself is a paradoxical joy. The liturgical celebrations of the night and of the day of the resurrection have the virtue of suddenly removing the memory of the passion to a vertiginous distance. Who has not been surprised and moved in his most profound depths by this breaking out of time which, the day of Easter and over the entire course of the Easter octave, makes Holy Week suddenly seem so far away? “The days of passion have come to an end!” proclaims the solemn benediction in triumph. No doubt, when we finally arrive in that land in which the shadows have been chased away, we will experience an ineffable astonishment that the torments of hell and of death itself have been banished for ever and at a single blow by the action of grace. . . . At the same time, however, the joy of Easter evokes another joy, of which, in

²²Chapelle, *Au creux du rocher*, 84.

²³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Pâques le Mystère* (Cerf, 1981), 264. Eng., *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).

this world, it is but the sacrament, and of which the nostalgia is translated as a cry of the soul in the ineffable and almost painful beauty of the minor-key melody of the *O filii et filiae*. He is alive, he has been raised up, but his Church, in the night of this world and in spite of the first rays of the new dawn, will continue to sigh for her Spouse until the world and history have finally come to completion in the full light of the Lord's Day.—*Translated by D. C. Schindler.* □

JEAN-PIERRE BATUT is auxiliary bishop of the diocese of Lyon, France.