

THE TRANSFIGURATION: OR, THE OUTCOME OF HISTORY PLACED IN THE HANDS OF FREEDOM

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“It is at the Transfiguration that he received this power [over death]. Jesus, if he had wanted to, would have been able to delight in the fullness of his glory from this moment on—but in that case, his joy would not have included our salvation.”



A theological mode of thought that lacks a historical dimension, as our own still too often does, cannot help but feel somewhat uneasy when faced with miracles, and above all with the miracle of the Transfiguration: in the first place, the unease is due to the acknowledgment that miracles rest on the assumption of God's right to intervene into our world; second, there is unease because taking the Transfiguration seriously forces us to admit that the incarnate Word, who took upon himself our earthly condition to the point of growing “in wisdom, stature, and in grace before God and man” (Lk 2:52), continued to evolve in his adult life, the beneficiary of decisive interventions by God on his behalf. If a certain scientific and technologicistic mentality rebels against the first point, resolved as it is to ban God from the world, the instinctive rejection of God's entry into

history comes to the same thing in the end: namely, the absence of genuine contact between him and our human condition, which is immersed in the future.

Before the practice of meditating on the mysteries of Jesus, which was still quite alive in the middle ages, was transformed by the pietism of the *devotio moderna*, the spiritual tradition of the West had nevertheless given birth to a remarkable contemplative prayer that would have been able to remedy this lack of historical sense. The rosary, the 150 *Ave Marias* of which were initially meant to replace the 150 psalms of the monastic office for the “simple faithful,” had evolved over the course of time into a contemplation of the great stages—the joyous, the sorrowful, and the glorious stages—of the earthly and glorified life of the Savior. Though it was a prayer based in Scripture, its proper character unfortunately became blurred for the Christian faithful. As it did, Christians began to abandon the *clausula* and citations from the gospels,¹ until they ended up contenting themselves with announcing the mysteries, without meditating on them any longer. This process of edulcoration came to a head in the nineteenth century with the addition of the frankly moralizing “fruits of the mystery.”²

Such a reduction of dogma to morality, as this is, has the immediate effect of a dismissal of history, since the scope of each event of Jesus’s life could in this regard be reduced to an edifying purpose that is by definition atemporal. From this perspective, some would interpret the Transfiguration as demonstrating the superiority of the contemplative life with respect to the life in the world; others, by contrast, because Jesus and his disciples end up coming back down the mountain, would say that it illustrates the necessity of returning to the tasks of the age while supplementing them with a soul that has just been re-energized by intimacy with the Lord.

¹The “*clausula*,” in evidence among the German Cistercians from the beginning of the fourteenth century, are interpolated phrases added to each *Ave* in order to recall the mystery being contemplated. A century later another Cistercian, Dominic of Prussia, came up with the idea of intercalating between the *Aves* brief phrases drawn from the gospels.

²We thus find the following in an old Missal: “subject of the mystery: nativity; fruit of the mystery: detachment and sacrifice”; “subject of the mystery: carrying of the cross; fruit of the mystery: resignation and patience.”

1. *The Transfiguration and Jesus:
aberration, demonstration, ratification, and glorification*

The following reflections aim, in contrast to all this, to draw the consequences of taking seriously the historicity of the mystery of the Transfiguration. By “historicity” we do not mean the question, important to be sure, of the historical value that ought to be accorded to the *accounts* that present this mystery to us, but more radically the question of knowing whether we in fact find ourselves in the presence of an event that affects in truth the *person* of the incarnate Word. Indeed, if the event-status of the Paschal mystery goes without saying, that is not always the case for the episodes that precede it, in the sense that one takes for granted that they do not affect Jesus in his being, but are above all the carrying out of a divine pedagogy, the goal of which is to enlighten Jesus’s disciples regarding the secret of his person. Of course, there is no question that the mysteries of Jesus are also loci of revelation for those who witness them; but their role does not end there; and it would be a form of docetism to deny their impact on Jesus himself in his human history. It is precisely this unconscious docetism that we need to identify and eliminate from our conception of Christ:³ for if we hold that the death and the Resurrection affect the person of the incarnate Word, we will have to say the same thing about all the events prior to these, and see them to some degree as moments in which his human freedom is just as required to determine itself in conformity to everything that preceded and with everything that will follow on the path of his glorification by the Father.⁴

³Following the gospel of John, Ignatius of Antioch already defended the reality of the mysteries accomplished by Christ in the flesh against the docetists, warning the faithful to “[r]emain deaf when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ who is the descendent of David, the son of Mary, who was truly born; who ate and drank; who was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, who was crucified and who truly died, before heaven, earth, and hell; who truly rose from the dead—his Father revealed it. Similarly, he will reveal to those among us who believe in him, in Christ Jesus, to whom alone we owe true life” (*Epistle to the Trallians*, 9).

⁴I permit myself to refer on this point to my article, “Toward a Theological Reading of the Baptism of Jesus,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 2005).

For all that, there is no need to hide the fact that by thus doing justice to history we are opting for a *lectio difficilior* of the gospel scene; that is why we now have to attempt to address as precisely as possible the inventory of difficulties that we will face.

1.1 The Transfiguration as aberration

We know the care the gospel accounts take to underscore the fact that the Transfiguration affects Jesus in his body, just as the Resurrection will: “He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun” (Mt 17:2; cf. Mk 9:2); “the appearance of his countenance was altered” (Lk 9:29). Now, it is precisely this corporeal character that, at first glance, might incline us to see the Transfiguration as a pure and simple aberration with respect to the incarnate condition of the divine Word. Let us elaborate.

As he meditates on the mysteries of Christ (in the part of the *Summa* conventionally known as the “life of Jesus”), Saint Thomas Aquinas takes an original approach, one that is eminently contemplative and for that reason totally disconcerting for a contemporary reader. This reader, even if he is a believer, is in effect too deeply influenced by modern rationalism to be able to see the Transfiguration as anything but an anomaly, that is, an erratic exception to the laws of nature: he is led in effect to forget that, in the eyes of biblical man, the cosmos as we experience it is not simply nature, but creature, and that the surprise does not lie primarily in the rupture of the laws that govern it, but most fundamentally in the fact that there are laws that remain over time in the first place.

Let us apply this to the Transfiguration. Whether it is in order to sneer or in order to marvel, our rationalist believer will discern on his own the surprising and exceptional character of the event with respect to the “normality” of Jesus’s life up to this moment. But in doing so, he will unwittingly forget the prior miracle that constitutes the apparent “normalcy” of this life itself. This miracle is that of the Incarnation: it is the miracle of miracles, not only in the moment in which it takes place, but in the fact that it continues and that it will remain for all eternity.⁵ The miracle

⁵This is so true that the heretics of the first centuries (Marcel of Ancyre) believed that once the redemption was accomplished and the history of salvation concluded,

consists essentially in the subsistence of human nature with the divine nature in the unity of the person “without confusion or separation” (Chalcedon, 451), even though there is no common measure between the two natures. That is why the logic of the soundest reason would apparently speak for monophysism, the idea that the human nature is absorbed by the divinity, and why theological reason takes a different position only because it follows upon faith, which obliges it to accept affirmations that surpass all reason.

Now, in relation to all of this, the first thing that the Transfiguration reveals is the miraculous character of the Incarnation itself. Indeed, on the mountain to which Jesus leads his disciples, we witness not so much a rupture in the normal order of things as a sort of return to normalcy, insofar as it becomes clear that Jesus, since he is the incarnate Word, should normally find himself permanently transfigured! That is why St. Thomas Aquinas does not hesitate for a second to define the Transfiguration as *the miracle of the interruption of a miracle*. And this interrupted miracle is precisely what appears most often to us as revelatory of what is “normal”: the fact that, in the hypostatic union, the human nature is able to subsist without being immediately and definitively glorified by the divine nature to which it is united. Now, this fact is even more astonishing insofar as, according to St. Thomas, this same assumed human nature delights from the first instant of its existence in the beatific vision of the divine essence: “the permanent miracle consists in suspending the radiation [of divine glory] which ought to have resulted from the vision [of the divine essence by Christ].”⁶ In this respect, the Transfiguration is a miracle only in a very particular sense: it is the miracle of the momentary interruption of a continuous miracle.

But there is more. In order to be justified, this miracle of the interruption of a miracle needed to avoid rupturing the logic

the Word would separate himself from his humanity just as one takes off one’s coat when one enters one’s home after having braved inclement weather outside. In order to fight against this doctrine, the phrase “and his kingdom will have no end” was added after the return to glory and the judgment of the living and the dead in the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

⁶Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le Christ en ses mystères: La vie et l’oeuvre de Jésus selon saint Thomas d’Aquin*, vol. 1 (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 286. We recall that, for St. Thomas, the earthly Christ delighted from the first moment of his life in the vision of the divine essence generally reserved for the blessed, and thus called “the beatific vision.”

according to which Christ prevented the divine glory from glorifying his body. Now, we know that this logic is ordered to the redemption. “For us men and for our salvation,” the Word consented to the unfathomable kenosis that makes him not only a man, but a man in whom divinity remains hidden. Only the Paschal glorification is supposed to put an end to this extraordinary self-effacement: even if, after Easter, Jesus agrees, for example, to eat the fish grilled before the eyes of his apostles (Lk 24:42–43), nothing is impossible any longer for him in his glorified body. From this moment on, the *lumen gloriae* will remove him definitively from his pilgrim state and from his mortal condition, and will allow him to enter into the upper room by passing through walls, to manifest himself in glory to Saul on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:3ff.), etc. But if this is the case, then the Transfiguration would seem to be an aberration, because everything happens here *before the resurrection* as if the Resurrection had already taken place.

But it is precisely for this reason that the Transfiguration can be nothing indeed but an aberration. As we shall see, if Jesus had not wanted to share our human condition in a full way, he would have had to remain in a permanent state of Transfiguration;⁷ but he refused to live in this mode before the Resurrection; thus, the event of the Transfiguration is, to all appearances, completely incoherent.

From this detour through St. Thomas, let us retain the idea that the Transfiguration anticipates the state of being resurrected by provisionally suspending, not the Incarnation itself, but that which represents the neuralgic point of the Incarnation, namely, the subordination of the assumed nature to the opacity of the pilgrim state and the perspective of death: as if Jesus suddenly decided no longer to play the game and broke all the rules of the Incarnation that God’s wisdom itself established.

⁷Benedict XVI underscores this in a very suggestive way by distinguishing the illumination of the face of Moses and that of the transfigured Christ: “As he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God” (Ex 34:29–35). Because Moses has been talking with God, God’s light streams upon him and makes him radiant. But the light that causes him to shine *comes upon him from the outside*, so to speak. Jesus, however, *shines from within*; he does not simply receive light, but he himself is light from light” (*Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 310, our emphasis).

1.2 *The Transfiguration as demonstration*

The question regarding the *why* of such an event reemerges at this point.

As we said, the Christian tradition has for the most part responded to this question by taking what is fundamentally a purely epiphanic approach to the event at issue. The fact that the Transfiguration is, with respect to us, an epiphany, a manifestation of the glory of Christ and of the state in which he will exist after the Resurrection, about this there is hardly any doubt; but theology has allowed itself to be clouded over by this evidence, to the point of reducing it to a single aspect: it is said that Christ wanted to show himself in glory in order to “prove” to his disciples that glory was constitutive of his person just as warmth and light are constitutive of the sun, even when the solar disk finds itself temporarily concealed by the passing of another heavenly body.

The medievals, and St. Thomas first of all, were heirs of this reduction of the mysteries of Christ to their pedagogical import. In this respect, commenting on the young Jesus’s trip to the Temple at the age of twelve, St. Thomas is hesitant to admit that he could have put questions to the scribes (Lk 2:46) in order to learn something from them—at the risk of forgetting that the kenosis of knowledge is logically included in the kenosis of power, and that a Christ who was omniscient from the moment of his conception would not be a Christ capable of growing.⁸ In his opinion, the fact of putting questions to the scribes could not have been anything on the part of the Savior but an act of condescension to their level, a way of instructing them, just as the Transfiguration will later be a maieutic for the disciples, preparing them in advance to surmount the scandal of the Passion.

Such an approach, however, runs counter to the facts: if the Transfiguration were nothing but a preparation to surmount a scandal, we would have to confess its failure. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to say that, at the moment of the Passion, Peter, James, and John—and the first of these in particular—were much more competent than their companions and less disoriented than they by

⁸Origen was more on target when he wrote “The same power that [Christ] had employed to humble himself, he employed in growing” (*Homélies sur saint Luc*, “Sources chrétiennes” 87, XIX, 2).

the arrest, judgment, and death of their Master. This contradiction of the facts, however, does not seem to have caused the liturgists much grief: the texts from the second Sunday of Lent and from August 6 (the two days that the Latin liturgy reads the gospel account of the Transfiguration) are composed entirely according to the same perspective, namely, that of the Savior's pedagogy in expectation of the Passion.⁹ The same idea has been echoing up through the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Christ's Transfiguration aims at strengthening the apostles' faith in anticipation of his Passion" (CCC 568).

This question hides a second one. If the value of the Transfiguration lies exclusively, or at least principally, in what it demonstrates, it constitutes an event *ad extra*, uniquely intended for the witnesses that Jesus chose, but does not concern Jesus himself. But don't we have to ask whether it is not in the first place an event *ad intra*? An event for Jesus, and perhaps even a trinitarian event? We see once again that such a question entails our taking into consideration a parameter that is too often ignored by the medieval writers: the historical dimension of Jesus's incarnate condition.

1.3 The Transfiguration as ratification

Of the seven "mountains" that punctuate the gospel geography (the mountain of the temptation, the mountain of the preaching, the mountain of prayer, the mountain of the Transfiguration, the mountain of anxiety, the mountain of the Crucifixion, and the mountain of the Ascension), not a single one, except perhaps that of the preaching, represents a place with nothing more than pedagogical significance. Indeed, wherever he is, Jesus is called to determine himself anew with respect to his Father,

⁹"After having foretold his death to his disciples, he led them to the holy mountain. In the presence of Moses and the prophet Elijah, he manifested his glory: he thus revealed to us that his Passion would lead to the glory of the Resurrection" (preface from the second Sunday of Lent). "He showed his glory to the witnesses he had chosen the day in which the body that he shares with us was bathed in a great light. He thus prepared the heart of his disciples to surmount the scandal of the Cross; he allowed the clarity to appear in his flesh, the light that would illuminate the body of his Church" (preface from August 6).

walking one step further along the path of obedience that leads to our redemption.

Here, too, according to St. Luke, Jesus prays: “And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white” (9:29). What is the content of his prayer? The evangelist does not tell us, but the logic of the text suggests a causal link between the content of the Father-Son dialogue and the external manifestation of the glory of Jesus—precisely, one could say, as the prayer on the Cross has a causal link to the Resurrection: Jesus died as he prayed, and that is why the Father did not leave him a prisoner of the horrors of Hades—for “it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:24b).

The prayer of intercession uttered on the Cross was preceded in Gethsemane by a prayer of ratification, with which it joins together: “not my will, but your will” (Mk 14:36). Only Jesus’s unreserved consent to the redemptive plan of his Father allows him to be the great intercessor on the Cross, the high Priest that our faith confesses, as the letter to the Hebrews expresses so clearly: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:7–10).

Another sign of the nature of this prayer is given to us by the gospel of John, who does not report to us either the Transfiguration or the agony at Gethsemane, but gathers the two together in a very significant episode from chapter 12. The account first presents a monologue from Jesus that ends with a request: “Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name” (Jn 12:27–28). Then, the account continues as follows: “Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him’” (12:28b–29). What is interesting in this text is that it lifts a corner of the veil that covers the nature of Jesus’s prayer at the moment in which the Father manifests him as the One by whom his Name will be glorified: it turns out to be a prayer of consent to the “Hour” foreseen by the Father, the “Hour” that Jesus speaks of in the

synoptic gospels as a “baptism” to be received (Lk 12:49; Mk 10:38) because it is the immersion in the abyss of death, the “Hour” which is the time of darkness (Lk 22:53) but to which he simply has to submit if he wants the scriptures, according to which things must be thus, to be fulfilled (cf. Mt 26:54).

It is under this condition that we can see the Transfiguration as a foreshadowing of the enthronement of Christ in the glory of his Resurrection. The anticipation is not due *in recto* to the concern to preserve his disciples from the scandal,¹⁰ it is due *in recto* to the obedience of Jesus, who by accepting in advance and without reservation the entirety of God’s plan finds himself rewarded by him for this obedience at the outset.

1.4 The Transfiguration as glorification

This reward is nothing other than the glorification, which from this moment on appears to Jesus as his own possession, as the second letter of Peter so clearly attests: “From when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Pt 1:17–18).

By virtue of his unreserved ratification of the Father’s will, the power of glory is placed into Jesus’s hands from this moment forward. To be sure, it is handed over into his possession so that he might renounce it in the very next moment, but this does not mean that it is any less under his authority, in such a way that he remains fully *free* with respect to the Passion.

With the help of this key, we can reread Paul’s christological hymn to the Philippians: “Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross”

¹⁰Jesus prophesies elsewhere about this scandal explicitly in the announcements of the Passion and the Resurrection that occur just before (Mt 16:21–23; Mk 8:31–33; Lk 9:22) and just after (Mt 17:22–23; Mk 9:30–32; Lk 9:43b–45) the Transfiguration. And no one understands him in either case.

(Phil 2:6–8). In one sense, the second verse of the hymn does not express anything other than what was already stated at the outset (that Jesus was “in the form of God”), but is now referred to the end of the drama of the Passion: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name” (2:9). The “therefore” is essential: what Christ had in his rightful possession he did not want to enjoy until the end of *a journey*. Between the initial divine condition and the final divine condition, the human history of Jesus stands as the locus wherein his path is wedded to our own, so that our own history might be enabled to enter itself into the eternal dialogue of the inner life of the Trinity.

In the same vein, finally, we ought to recall chapter 12 of the letter to the Hebrews, in which we are offered the Guide of our faith as a model to follow, the one “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). In this latter text, the only place in the entire letter in which we find the word “cross,” it is the decisive choice between joy and the cross that is emphasized as what gives Jesus the decisive title “Guide” or “Pioneer” (*archegos*) of our faith.

By virtue of his willingness to undergo the Passion, the Son in the Incarnation receives the whole of the Father’s glory. From the moment of the Transfiguration, which is the original place of his consent, he is able to do with it what he wishes. But, one will ask, what use is it if he possesses it precisely to the extent that he renounces it? It allows him to dispose of it when and how the Father wills, and to walk toward his Passion, not in the least with the desire to be killed but by the strength of the power of life, which is the only one he has. Such is the secret of his obedience out of pure love, which transfigures the very nature of human obedience: whereas I do not obey without feeling that my own will has been taken from me insofar as another has imposed his will on me, Jesus is able to experience the fullness of his Sonship in the flesh and to carry out an act of pure filial gratitude—“How can I repay the Lord for all the good he has done to me?” (Ps 115–116:12).

At this point, we can ask again about what happens *in obliquo* for the disciples in the event of the Transfiguration. For there can be no doubt whatsoever that Jesus wanted to make them witnesses of this event with the very precise goal of leading them one day to *have communion* in his own consent to the Father’s will.

2. *The Transfiguration and us:
expropriation, anticipation, imitation, communion*

Jesus' Transfiguration was seen by five witnesses. Three of them were alive, and the two others, Moses and Elijah, were dead, but returned to earth for the express reason of contemplating Jesus and being seen by the other three witnesses. Now, it seems to be that the two "dead" witnesses are the only ones with a direct grasp of what happens to Jesus (they do not veil their faces, but contemplate his Face), while the three "living" witnesses are thrown completely off balance by the event. It is thus good to ask ourselves first of all why it is that Moses and Elijah ceased to be strangers to the world of the Transfiguration; secondly, we can ask under what conditions Peter, James, and John will be able, when their time comes, to enter that world themselves.

2.1 *The Transfiguration as expropriation,
interpreted through the Passovers of Moses and Elijah*

Moses's deed, and Elijah's, are well known. But we do not always pay sufficient attention to the fact that their two lives are marked by a great caesura that corresponds in each of their cases to the theophany of God on Mount Horeb.

For Moses, the caesura occurs in chapter three of Exodus, in the famous scene of the Burning Bush. Over the course of the two preceding chapters, the sacred text recounted for us the oppression of the Hebrews in Egypt, and then Moses's birth and adolescence. But curiously, there was not a single mention in these chapters of the principal protagonist of biblical history: God himself. During the very time of his people's oppression, God remains obstinately absent. Indeed, he is doubly absent: not only does he not manifest himself, but, even more revealing, he is absent from the memories of the Hebrews, since it does not occur to anyone at all to cry out to him. It is in this literally a-theistic atmosphere that Moses, saved from the waters, grows up and is "instructed in all of the wisdom of the Egyptians," becoming "powerful in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22).

From this perspective, we understand better why Moses, obsessed with justice and confronted by the injustice of which his brothers are the victims, is incapable of reacting in any other way than to take justice into his own hands and to battle injustice by

means of murder (Ex 2:12): from that moment on, there is nothing left to do but to take flight from Pharaoh so as not to have to take responsibility for the consequences of his actions (2:15). Exiled from the country of Madian and having become the spouse of Zipporah (2:21), he is the figure of a man who has reached middle age (“forty years old” if we believe Acts 7:23) and is forced to admit that the upward swing, the active phase of his life has been a flop. On the point of heading over the hill and into the passive side of his life, he now has to choose between despair and a radical change in thinking: a change that is impossible for human beings, but, as the sequel of history will show, remains possible for God.

There is a great similarity between Moses standing before the Burning Bush and Elijah standing before the theophany that he will be granted to see on the same mountain many centuries later. To be sure, the prophet is presented at the beginning of his experience as “a man of God” (1 Kgs 17:24), and it is as just such a man of God that he engages in the battle of Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20–40). But in his jealous zeal for the Lord Sabaoth, he seems to know better than the Omnipotent One himself what deployment of might God’s cause authorizes, going so far as to cut the throats of the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal with his own hands near the torrent of Quishon, taking care that not one of them manages to escape (18:40). The consequences of this act are the same for Elijah as they were for Moses before him: he is forced to flee the wrath of Jezebel, just as Moses fled that of Pharaoh years before.

Elijah, like Moses before him, finds himself with a choice to make, standing before the alternatives of despair (1 Kgs 19:4) and an impossible reversal in the logic of his existence. Now, for each of them, the theophany of Horeb ends in having to retrace their steps in order to confront the same enemies once again, this time with weapons of an entirely different sort: the weapons of God’s righteousness, the very ones that Jesus will use in turn, exclusively of any other means.

Moses and Elijah had the experience of dying to themselves and to their own will. And if it is true to say that one has to die in order to see God, then Moses and Elijah died on Mount Horeb, so that henceforward, as the letter to the Romans has it, they might not “yield [their] members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield [themselves] to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and [their] members to God as instruments of righteousness” (Rom 6:13).

This passage through death, this expropriation of oneself, corresponds to the discovery of the truth of God. This is “a death to sin in order to live for God in Christ Jesus,” just as “Christ died to sin once and for all,” and “his life is lived for God” (Rom 6:10–11). It is not that the earthly life of Moses and Elijah comes to an end at Horeb—any more than the earthly life of Jesus comes to an end at Tabor—, but they will live from here on out as “brought back from death to life,” to use Paul’s expression. They will have in a certain sense left their deaths behind them, just as every baptized person must leave his death behind him in order to live a new life. And that is why their departure from this world will never cease to be shrouded in mystery: Moses departed from the scene and was buried by God himself, and his grave has remained a secret to this day (Dt 34:6); Elijah was taken away on a chariot of fire after he made Elisha cross the Jordan on his bare feet, as a prefiguration of the Easter-Ascension-Pentecost sequence, and sent down upon him a double share of his spirit (2 Kgs 8–9f.).

For Moses and for Elijah, the mysterious relationship between Horeb and the mountain of the Transfiguration is one of mystical identity. That is why what happens to Jesus is not only perfectly intelligible to them, but they echo it, as representatives of the Law and the Prophets, so that the scriptures might be fulfilled, which say that this is the way it must be. “Having appeared in glory, they spoke of his ‘Exodus’ (*exodos*), which he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem,” as Luke proclaims (9:31), emphasizing moreover by the use of this word the contrast with the three disciples’ inability to understand.

2.2 The Transfiguration as anticipation of the mystery of the Church

“The Lord will create upon every dwelling place of Mount Zion, and upon her assemblies, a cloud during the day and smoke in the night with the shining of flaming fire. And above all, the glory of the Lord will be a canopy, a hut of foliage, giving shade during the days of great heat and serving as refuge and shelter against the storm and rain”: this passage from Isaiah (4:5–6) describes the future temple, in which God will come to rest over the whole expanse of Mount Zion and on the entire holy Convocation that will gather there. For this gathering, the divine glory will be like a canopy and like a *soukka*, the cloud that takes the place of the tabernacle or tent;

in short, the building itself will no longer be there, for the temple will henceforward no longer be made of stones, but of human beings.

On the mountain of the Transfiguration, the small group gathered around Jesus seems to us at first as a beginning of the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. In its mission of anticipation, this little group proclaims the Church, the new Temple that Jesus intends to "build" with his own hands (Mt 16:18).

In the book of Exodus (40:34–35), the cloud covered the sanctuary, but not the people, who were not allowed to enter into it. And Moses himself, forced to remain outside, found himself in the same situation as the rest of his people. But the situation is altogether different from the beginning of the gospel of Luke: for the first time, a human creature, who has become the sanctuary of the Most High in person, finds himself "overshadowed" (*episkiazein*) by the same cloud (Lk 1:35). Finally here in the Transfiguration, the decisive step has been taken, because the cloud "overshadows," not only Jesus, but also Moses and Elijah, and the initial cell of the Church represented by the three disciples (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:34).

There is an Old Testament feast that can be considered a more direct anticipation of the mystery of the Church. This is the feast of the *tabernacles*, which is called *souccot* in Hebrew. This feast, which has its roots in the agrarian celebration of the harvest and the new wine, originally celebrated the fertility of the Promised Land, even though huts of foliage were built in order to guarantee the preservation of the vines. As is the custom in Israel, a meaning connected to salvation history would take over naturalistic symbolism, leading one to reinterpret the huts by relating them to the tents set up in the desert after the departure from Egypt: just like in every process of historicization, the point was to bring an event from salvation history back to life liturgically in order to live already now in hope the ultimate reality that it prefigured.

This eschatological reality is here a new Exodus, in which, according to the Talmud,¹¹ the tents will have become luminous clouds, they will be the place wherein God's kingdom will gather all the nations: for "it will happen that all the survivors of all the nations that have marched against Jerusalem will come year after year to

¹¹Still an oral tradition in Jesus's time, the Talmud would be written down in the second century.

prostrate themselves before the King, the Lord Sabaot, and celebrate the feast of the Tabernacles” (Zach 14:16).

Peter’s intuition while witnessing the Transfiguration and the presence of Moses and Elijah is to relate this event to the eschatological fulfillment prophesied by the feast of *souccot*, and the scene that follows would seem to prove him right: he had indeed scarcely suggested that they set up three tents, for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, when the cloud came over them and took them into its shade. It seems in any event that Peter had made a mistake by putting Moses and Elijah on the same level as Jesus himself. The voice of the Father himself corrects this error: “Behold my beloved Son, listen to him” (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7).¹² The Church, the first sketch of which we see here, does not contain Jesus within herself as one member among the others, or even the most eminent of them all: of this Church, he is the Head, he who “is before all things” and in whom “all things subsist” (Col 1:17). And what she needs “to listen” to, and having listened, needs to communicate to all others, is nothing other than the sorrowful and salutary message of the Cross of her Lord.

2.3 The Transfiguration as necessary imitation

Now, this message, authenticated by the Father who came to confirm in person the Law and the Prophets, is the very message that the disciples do not wish to hear—and Peter foremost among them. Nevertheless, it is a message that Jesus will not cease repeating to them: “The Son of Man will have to suffer greatly; to be rejected by the elders, the high priests, and the scribes; be killed; and be resurrected on the third day” (Lk 9:22).

We have already pointed out that the announcements of the Passion frame the account of the Transfiguration: it is therefore clear that the event added nothing new for Jesus to the chapter of this prophetic knowledge. The *dei* (“it is necessary”) that keeps issuing from his mouth like a linguistic tic indicates, before as well as after, that he is not acting on his own will, as was the case with Moses and Elijah before their encounter with God, but out of obedience to the

¹²Matthew and Luke make an allusion here to Isaiah 43:1 (the first song of the servant): “My beloved Son, *in whom I am well-pleased*” (Mt 17:5; cf. 3:17); “my Son, my Chosen One” (Lk 9:35).

divine plan. In any event, after the Transfiguration, something new is perhaps revealed, something that we find confirmed in the Good Shepherd discourse recorded in the gospel of John. Jesus says, with respect to his life: “I have the power to give it and the power to take it back, according to the commandment that I received from my Father” (Jn 10:18). An affirmation of this sort presupposes that he is aware of having a power over death, and indeed over his own; but also, and above all, over his own Resurrection.

It is at the Transfiguration that he received this power. Jesus, if he had wanted to, would have been able to delight in the fullness of his glory from this moment on—but in that case, his joy would not have included our salvation. By renouncing that joy out of love for us, he deprives himself of this immediate delight and takes on the hard path of the Passion in order to be put to death by human hands and be resurrected on the third day. Like every divine operation *ad extra*, the Resurrection is, in effect, a trinitarian act, of such a sort that we would have to say at the same time that the Father raised Jesus from the dead and that Jesus raised himself from the dead in the power of the Spirit.

The imitation of Christ that is demanded of us lies along the lines of this renunciation: “If someone wants to follow me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me. Indeed, whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:24–25) “Life came down from heaven in order to be killed; the Bread descended in order to hunger; the Way descended in order to tire on the path; the Spring descended in order to thirst; and you: you refuse to suffer?” Saint Augustine asks.¹³ But this leaves open the whole question of how it is possible for us to imitate such a model.

2.4 The Transfiguration as revelation about our communion in the mystery of Christ

What becomes clear here is that, in order for the Transfiguration to attain its goal with respect to the disciples, it is necessary to get beyond the exemplarist attitude, in which one sees quite clearly what needs to be done, but without having any clue about the

¹³*Sermon 78, 6 (cf. CCC 556).*

question of knowing where one should draw the capacity to do it. Such a capacity cannot be anything but a grace. In order for Christ to demand that I live what he lived, it is necessary that his own life be given to me *in communion*: it is indeed communion in Christ's victory over death, and not what he had wanted to achieve by his own will, which will give Peter one day the power to confront his own death.

The same thing remains true for us, thanks to the mediation of the Church, which is able to communicate to us, through the Word and sacraments, the whole mystery of Christ. It is through the Church in effect that the unimaginable becomes possible: that which another has done becomes my own property, my own good. "Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us. . . . We are called only to become one with him, for he enables us as the members of his Body to share in what he lived for us in his flesh as our model."¹⁴ In celebrating the feast of the Transfiguration, the Church is thus founded on begging the Father to allow us "to listen to the voice of [his] beloved Son, so that we might one day share his inheritance with him."¹⁵—*Translated by D. C. Schindler.* □

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¹⁴CCC 521.

¹⁵Roman Missal, Mass for the Transfiguration, Opening Prayer.