

A Few Drops of Blood
Fr. John W. Konkle

The primary symbol of Christians is the cross. Nearly half of each Gospel is devoted to Passion Week. Hardly a page goes by in St. Paul's writings where the cross of Christ is not foundational to his thought. Even the most iconoclastic Christian confessions prominently display the cross in and on their churches. Yet, in spite of its prevalence, it remains as much as ever a scandal to those who are seeking a sign and folly to those seeking wisdom (1 Cor 1:22-23). For the cross can neither be reduced to an instrument of earthly power nor an object of human theorizing. It is, rather, to be experienced; for Christ is not crucified alone but *we* are to be crucified with him (Gal 2:20; Rom 6:5-8).

The Scriptures use many metaphors and images to invite us into the salvation that comes through the cross. Sin is illness and disease; salvation is our healing. Sin is impurity and uncleanness; salvation is being cleansed and purified. Sin is blindness and darkness; salvation is being granted sight and being enlightened. Sin is being lost; salvation is being found. Sin is being enslaved and in bondage; salvation is being freed, ransomed, redeemed. All of these images, and more, are invitations to a contemplative reflection on the cross and our transformative encounter with it, pathways to our co-crucifixion. In what follows, we briefly explore this last set of metaphors—bondage, ransom and redemption—including some of the ways we *misappropriate* the imagery to counterproductive ends.

Our Lord's self-description is that He entered the world "to give his life as a *ransom* for many" (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; cf I Tim 2:6; emphasis added). A ransom is the price paid to *redeem* someone from bondage. The bondage in which humans are held is variously described as enslavement to sin(s) (Rom 6:6, 20; Tit 3:3), to death (Rom 5:12,14,17; 6:9; Eph 2:1,5), to Satan and the elemental spirits of the universe (Acts 26:18; Gal 4:3), and to the works of the law (Gal 3:10ff). More generally, as St. Peter puts it: "whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved" (II Pt 2:19). How often we feel overcome and controlled by anger, envy, vanity, lusts, fears, anxiety, gluttony, gossip, talkativeness, and greed! We feel helpless in the face of sins that so easily entangle us—torn between the desire for what we know to be good and the self-destructive evil that so readily entices us. We long to be freed from this diabolical tyranny.

The freedom that we truly desire is the freedom we are offered. Our Lord's life, given as a ransom, is for us our redemption--we have been purchased with his blood (Acts 20:28;

1Cor 6:20; 7:23; Rev 5:9) and are no longer slaves of the various hostile forces that manipulate our lives. There is, however, a paradox for the redeemed: being delivered from this bondage we are not thereby free to selfishly follow our own pursuits but instead are enslaved to God (Rom 6:22). The cross, understood in terms of ransom and redemption, leads us to an existential crossroads: do I prefer a life of sin, being free from God's interference in my daily choices, or do I prefer a life united to God, being free from the self-destructive delusions of sin. If the latter, then I too must be crucified with Christ, but if the former, I remain distant from the cross. The cross leaves no *via media*, no middle way.

In his Second Paschal Oration, St Gregory the Theologian guides our approach to the ransom metaphor by drawing us away from the idle speculation of intellectual curiosity and toward the personal engagement of contemplative reflection. He points out that many have been tempted to pursue the ransom/redemption imagery by asking a question the Scriptures never ask: To whom was the ransom paid? St. Gregory exposes the foolishness of such rationalistic pursuits:

To whom was the blood poured out for us, and why was it poured out, that great and renowned blood of God, who is both high priest and victim? For we were held in bondage by the Evil One, sold under sin, and received pleasure in exchange for evil. But if the ransom is not given to anyone except the one holding us in bondage, I ask to whom this was paid, and for what cause? If to the Evil One, what an outrage! For the robber would receive not only a ransom from God, but God himself as the ransom, and a reward so greatly surpassing his own tyranny that for its sake he would rightly have spared us altogether. (Homily 45.22 in *Festal Orations* SVSP, 2008, pp. 161-190; unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotes are from this text.)

A ransom is paid to the one who holds others in bondage. Although the Holy Scriptures describe us as being in bondage in several ways, St. Gregory focuses his attention on our bondage to Satan: Satan, a robber, held us in tyranny. However, he does not rightfully own us, St. Gregory argues, and does not rightly treat us. Thus, Satan's grip on us is unjust in its origin (we do not rightfully belong to him), and it is unjust in its execution (he does not treat us as a master should properly treat his servants). Thus, no one (let alone God) is required to make a payment (let alone a payment of God himself) for Satan's injustice. The conclusion, of course, is that it is ludicrous to think that God paid a ransom to Satan. God owes Satan nothing; God cannot be manipulated by Satan.

St. Gregory next considers the possibility of the ransom being paid to the Father.

But if it was given to the Father, in the first place, how? For we were not conquered by him. And secondly, on what principle would the blood of the Only-begotten delight the Father, who would not receive Isaac when he was offered by his father but switched the sacrifice, giving a ram in place of the reason-endowed victim? (Homily 45.22)

St Gregory first notes that the metaphor breaks down if one interprets the ransom as being paid to the Father. A ransom is paid to the one who holds us in bondage, and it is clear that it is not the Father to whom we are in bondage. Rather, quite the opposite: as we noted above, we come to be enslaved to him *after* being freed from the bondage to death, sin and Satan (Rom 6). If we were not enslaved to the Father, it makes no sense to pay a ransom to him.

St Gregory's second, and far more theologically reaching, reason for claiming that the ransom is not paid to the Father is expressed in the rhetorical question: "On what principle did the blood of His only begotten Son delight the Father?" For the Son's death to count as payment to the Father, it would have to be something that the Father wanted and delighted in. Sadly, many today do believe that the Father delighted in, was appeased by, the sacrifice of his Son. In St. Gregory's view, however, it is a *reductio ad absurdum* to think God was pleased to receive His own Son's blood.

The lesson to be learned from St. Gregory's approach to this sort of explanatory endeavor is that the images and metaphors of Scripture were not given in order to satisfy our intellectual curiosity by devising cleverly constructed metaphysical theories. They are rather passageways through which we experientially encounter the freeing reality of Divine presence; they are the existential doorways through which we are crucified with Christ and he with us. After revealing to us how the metaphors should *not* be treated, St. Gregory elaborates a proper approach in his ensuing multi-faceted comment on the Son's blood sacrifice.

It is clear that the Father accepts him [the Son], though he neither asked for this nor needed it, because of the divine plan, and because *the human being must be sanctified by the humanity of God*, that God might himself set us free and conquer the tyrant by force and lead us back to himself by the mediation of the Son, who also planned this to the honor of the Father, to whom it is manifest that he yields all things. (Homily 45.22; emphasis added)

The incarnation, and our participatory sanctification through it, is responsible for the overthrow of Satan and our deliverance from his bondage. We see here that St. Gregory has abandoned any attempt to complete the ransom metaphor in a literal way, but rather moved to a military one. Satan is not paid off; he is defeated. Furthermore, the goal of our transformation is not simply deliverance from bondage but being drawn into the Father's presence, communing with him—a process in which we participate by co-operating with the Son's mediation instead of being subject to the force employed by the tyrant. In this way, we are sanctified by *the humanity of God*—a profound expression of our being restored by Christ taking on and refashioning our humanity, being with us as Emmanuel not only in every aspect of our life but also in our death, healing everything we voluntarily let him touch in us. Our refashioning is thus brought about by our synergy with the sublime submission of the Son to the Father: “who also planned this to the honor of the Father, to whom it is manifest that he yields all things.” Our freedom from tyrannical bondage, then, is the freedom to be sons of the living God, yielding ourselves to him in all things—obedient to the One who *is* love and who truly loves us.

In the very next sentence of his Paschal sermon St. Gregory warns: “This much we have said of Christ, and *the greater part will be revered by silence*” (Homily 45.22; emphasis added). How, *and how much*, we communicate matters a great deal. We can not only misuse metaphors, asking questions about them that would only make sense if they were intended to be literal, but we can also simply talk too much. Talk instead of reflect, meditate, contemplate. Metaphors and figurative language are intended to draw into a reverent silence, an inner stillness deep within our own souls where we encounter the crucified Christ, and where we allow ourselves to be crucified with him. As St. Cyril of Alexandria puts it, “Prostrate yourself in silence before the ineffable” (quoted in Michel Evdokimov's *Two Martyrs in a Godless World: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alexander Men*, p.69).

We are not asked in the Scriptures or in the creeds to believe in this or that metaphysical theory. For the mutation of metaphors to metaphysics moves the locus of experience from the mystical (in the heart) to the discursive (in the head). Thus, following his own advice, St. Gregory concludes his homily not with discursive arguments nor with a detailed metaphysics, but with poetical astonishment and existential wonder at the experiential reality of *his* salvation:

Many indeed are the wonders of that time: God crucified; the sun darkened and again rekindled, for created things also had to suffer with the Creator; the veil

split; blood and water pouring from his side, the first as human, the second as above the human; the earth shaken, rocks broken in pieces for the sake of the Rock; dead people raised to bring faith in the completion of the universal resurrection; the signs at the tomb and after the tomb. Who can adequately sing their praise? Yet none is like the wonder of *my salvation: a few drops of blood recreate the whole world* and become for all human beings like a curdling agent for milk, binding and drawing us together into one. (45.29; emphasis added)

The cross, and all the cosmic events intertwined with it, find their existential home in *my salvation*. For the astonishment of the cross is not simply that “a few drops of [divine] blood” recreate me, but that they *recreate the whole world*, uniting me, together with all, into the unity for which we were created (Jn 17:20-26). This reality is available to all who are willing to enter into the beautiful imagery expressed not only in the Scriptures but which also permeates the hymns of our Church as we draw near to and arrive at Great and Holy Pascha. An entrance that can ultimately be made only in reverent silence, deep inner stillness, where words cease and Reality begins, where words are supplanted by the Word. May God teach us, in this Lenten and Paschal season, to proceed a little further into the Paschal mystery: our salvation, the recreation of the whole world, and our collective unity with the One who has redeemed us--all through a few drops of blood.