

THE DIVISIONS OF THE WAY OF THE CROSS

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A NATURAL division of the fourteen stations of the cross lies simply in this: that according to the arrangement usually adopted in churches the first seven stations are a journey out from the sanctuary, the last seven a journey back. The division lies between the second fall and the meeting with the women of Jerusalem; and it is natural that it should fall there for this reason too, that in the touching sequence of stations four to six Christ has given us, through Mary in the first place and then through Simon and Veronica, all that pertains to our own cross-bearing in this life: the share of his burden and the likeness to himself bearing it. After that, immediately, he falls for the second time as if emptied of strength by his gift. The seventh station has the nature of a conclusion, but what is concluded is only the first half of the way: its outward journey. There follows the meeting with the women of Jerusalem and then, immediately again, the most grievous fall of all, prelude to the work on the Holy Hill.

The three falls punctuate the Way in a manner perfectly intelligible and significant, and before it can become quite evident to us that the eighth station commences a return in a very much deeper sense than a physical turning back to the sanctuary, we must consider how the Way is divided by the falls themselves.

They resolve the remaining stations into four groups of two, three, one and five. The two stations of the first group present us firstly with the figure of Christ in his condemnation, secondly with the Cross and Christ's acceptance of it. They appear in a sense static, preliminary to the movement of wayfaring which characterizes the second group of three. The single station of the third group is also in movement, but it has an element which is lacking to the group preceding it, an element of turning away. The last group of five is 'static' if we speak in comparison with the groups which lie between the falls, for its movement is of another order, an ascent and descent: the raising of Christ on the cross and the descent into the tomb.

In relation to these four groups, the three falls themselves may be considered as consequent upon the group of stations preceding them, or as prelude to what lies next ahead. By considering them

so we gather something of what they are and why they are there. They mark out the map of the Way. It is not by chance that they appear where they do, for the Way itself is a reality having objectively defined contours. What in the figure of Jesus is the posture of falling is, in the Way itself, an ascent or descent to another level or depth of reality.

This must be so unless it be certain that the falls signify literally no more than they portray. But the intelligibility of the falls and of the grouping of the stations by means of them is itself a sufficient answer to this objection. Before going on to consider this grouping in more detail we may note that if the falls were meant to express only the stumbling of a cruelly enfeebled and overburdened man, then the decreasing interval between the first and second and the second and third would have some explanation in the increasing exhaustion of the cross-bearer. But in that case the abruptness of the first fall upon the acceptance of the cross would be unexplained. And again, in that case why not four falls separated by three, two and one stations respectively? The drop from three to one may express increasing weariness but not, on the face of it, as if that were the principal thing expressed.

The first fall follows immediately upon the acceptance of the Cross. At first sight this fall expresses the seriousness of the Cross. It is the burden that none but he can carry, and in token of this as soon as he receives it he falls under its weight. And we may note that iconographically it is of more significance that the Saviour should be depicted as falling at all than that he should so appear a given number of times. Nevertheless for the perfection of our Way three falls were required. In principle the significance of our Lord's falling is contained in this first fall, more even than in the others. In order to see how this is so we must proceed to the others and then return to it.

We have seen that the second fall comes as a conclusion to the series of stations in which, through Mary, Christ has given to us in the persons of Simon and Veronica a share in his own cross-bearing and the imprint of his own divine Face. The heart which acknowledges these gifts sees him as emptied by them of all that was communicable to us in the action and compassion of this life. He falls exhausted of the life he has given us; and yet at the eighth station he has risen again.

This eighth station, not so much in itself as from the point of

view of one coming by degrees to understand the contours of the way, is a critical and difficult one. In the previous sequence he has accepted the robust help of Simon, the beautiful and womanly service of Veronica, whose veil is at once a kerchief to wipe the sweat from his face and the token of a heart which turns towards him like a mirror, and he has given abundantly in return. In this, which corresponds to another level of the contemplative life, he says: 'Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.' There is no harshness in these words but neither can there be any trace of a twentieth-century politeness—as if the Lord who gave to the tears and the unloosed hair of Magdalene a permanent place in his gospel were emotionally incapable of giving a fitting recompense to tears. 'Weep not for me.' If in the previous sequence our Lord was fully responsive to human sympathy, his words now put him beyond its reach.

That is our first indication of the position this station occupies in the map of the Way. There is present an element of withdrawal. In the meetings with Simon and Veronica a communication at the overt physical level is seen to have a spiritual and interior effect; which effect is not so much a reward of the overt action as a revelation of its interior significance. Thus the conversion of Simon is not something other than his share of the cross-bearing; it is that action itself willed and understood. The imprint of the Holy Face given to Veronica confirms and reveals the grace of her compassion. In both cases the communication is positive both as regards what is done and the effect or inner significance of what is done. In each case a positive external service is rewarded, so to say, by a positive interior identification with Christ.

In the eighth station the case is different. The emotionally positive sympathy of tears is, with divine delicacy, turned aside. 'Weep for yourselves and for your children.' The prophecy of disaster upon Jerusalem and upon the future generations of mankind is indeed a recompense, but of another order. It is a recompense which, though it imparts an insight of the divine prophecy, nevertheless completes the act of withdrawal by offering a sphere to which tears are relevant. Here we may ask ourselves, 'Did not Veronica weep as she offered the sweat-cloth?' It would be strange if she did not. It appears that 'weep not for me' is reserved for proficients upon the spiritual way who would understand that admonition.

There is no need to invoke here the reflection that it was the external actions of Simon and Veronica which were rewarded rather than the inactive tears of the holy women. The Lord who confirmed to Mary her better part which shall not be taken away from her was no activist. In all the way of Christ from the praetorium to the tomb there is a passive aspect of his humanity according to which each step of the way adds to the sum of the divine sufferings. But there is another aspect, that of the divine victory, which shines undiminished in his prostrate body at the foot of Calvary and in the dead body that is taken down from the cross.

The 'Weep not for me' appears then to have the nature of a purgation, so that 'the purgation of the holy women' might be a fitting title for this station. In contrast to the lugubrious readings which are often made before it, this eighth station has the temper of a *sursum corda*—lift your hearts *higher*: to the level, that is, of the victory implicit in Christ's eternal nature. To this victory nothing of ours can contribute. He goes on in his seamless garment alone, leaving tears to be wept for the disasters that are sure to overtake the world that rejects him.

The fall which immediately follows separates this station, with its movement at once onward and interiorly ascending, from the tenth station in which Christ is divested of his seamless garment. The seamless garment of the Word is a figure of the created universe, woven in one piece throughout. Here, his external manifestation laid aside, he stands exposed, clothed only in his naked Godhead.

In the last group of five stations, the first three, the ascent of the Holy Hill, exactly reverse the symbols of mankind's fall and expulsion from Paradise. Christ enters naked into this primordial place as Adam left it clothed. He restores to the Tree its better fruit, and is raised upon it, *ut qui in ligno vincebat ligno quoque vinceretur*. At the foot of the tree, Mary the mother of divine grace is in the place of that mother of all mankind whom the serpent, coiled there, first deceived. The fall which precedes the entry into this primordial place is the severest of all. Iconographically Jesus is shown fallen flat upon his face.

The indications are that the second and third falls mark, in a spiritual sense, two sharp ascents of the Way. The 'level' immediately consequent upon the first fall and the encounter with

Mary is that of the world of men, of reciprocal and affirmative action, and of the beginning of the contemplative life, the reception of the divine image in the heart. To the level reached in the station which immediately follows the second fall belong the *via negativa* and the purgations which govern ascent in the contemplative life. It has a certain correspondence with purgatory and especially with the Mountain of Purgatory in the *Divina Commedia*. It is a place in which the 'actionless activity' of Christ's eternal nature is victorious over temporal attachment. The 'primordial place' beyond the third fall corresponds to the summit of that mountain. The work that is done here is the *opus perfectionis et deitatis*.

The imagery of wayfaring and of the ascent by stages of the Holy Hill is verified interiorly of life in Christ. He indeed traverses this path in the first place; a path which can be shown to the pilgrim, of which the dust can be gathered in the hand, and he traversed it at a certain and ascertainable time 'under Pontius Pilate' as the creed commemorates. And yet the Way is all in Christ in whom, as St Paul said, all things subsist. The 'levels' to which the Way ascends are identifiable according to all of what they are and signify, in his total reality, in which the humanity, the limbs our hands could have touched, the soul which suffered the betrayal of friends, subsist in the hypostasis of the Word in the unity of the divine essence.

Because of the imperfection of every spatial symbol it is necessary to consider the falls too according to depth: as three giant strides of his into the heart of reality. The reality is his own and it is he who strides thither. This consideration helps us to understand something of the first fall in which is comprised the significance of falling, not twice or three times but of falling at all.

From the point of view we first adopted, the first fall must represent the descent of Christ into the common world of men. At this level having accomplished all that he had to do, he ascends at the place of the second fall to a higher level of his own reality and shows (negatively) the way of that ascent to the holy women. Then, having ascended higher still he puts off the seamless garment at what is spiritually the utmost peak of creation, the 'point' at which all creation dies in God. The same is signified with regard to his own humanity at the third fall where he lies prostrate. What from that point of view is the peak of creation is,

if we speak in terms of depth, its centre, and the Godhead which is above all created nature is also the motionless reality about which all things revolve. If the Holy Hill is the summit of the world, it is also its spiritual centre as the axle is centre of the wheel.

To apply these two perspectives to the first group of stations: according to the first, in station one Christ appears on the hill of the praetorium at once proclaimed and condemned. The questioning of Pilate, the robe, the reed and the crown of thorns, the *Ecce Homo*, Pilate's lavabo before the sacrifice, all have an ironically prophetic character—a character which is present in the whole account of the Passion, for he had said, 'if these should hold their peace the stones will cry out' and from that moment the very stones do—which inerrantly proclaims him who he is. The first station requires his presentation as who he is, more particularly as hero of the Passion. He is presented upon the hill which in point of fact is the praetorium, in point of iconographic requirement the eminence demanded by his first presentation as object of our meditation. From this eminence, having accepted the cross, the proper instrument of his work of salvation, he descends by the first fall into the world of men, the world in which those who are making the meditation find themselves. The journey outwards to station seven accomplishes the work he had to do amongst us at our own level. Station eight commences what is both his return and the possibility of ours by an ascending and arduous route with a re-descent in the deposition and the laying in the tomb.

According to the second perspective he appears at first 'in the centre' of his own divine reality. The utterance of the Word is also his indivisible distinction from the Father, according to the negative formula *Pater non est Filius*. The condemnation which proclaims him is also the utterance of a word, the word of his heavenly Father delivering him to death by the cross: the cross which he accepted before ever he left his Father's side; 'God so loved the world that he sent his son'. Bearing in himself the cruciform principle, archetype of all that proceeds from God by his proceeding from the eternal Father, pattern of all raying of the eternal truth, supreme analogue of the universal structure, he steps outward, a step which could not be other than a fall. It is the primordial fall more ancient than that of Adam, the fall of the Word into the world of its own manifestation: by which fall he also emptied himself taking the form of a servant.

By a metaphysical necessity the meeting with Mary immediately follows the first fall. It is she who gives the divine footfall a place to rest: who gives him birth in the world. Of this birth there are two aspects: an external aspect corresponding to the title *Mater Salvatoris*, according to which he sets forth from his meeting with her in the form of a servant carrying his cross: but there is also an interior aspect corresponding to the title *Mater Divinae Gratiae*, according to which he is born in the heart, rising cruciform therein to rejoin the side of the Father which indeed he has never abandoned. And in the sequence of the stations this interior aspect abides in the heart of Mary who will be present again when it is to be reaffirmed.

From the centre, which is the interior reality of Christ, the outward work of salvation is unwound through Mary to be re-wound again into the centre as she receives his dead body from the cross into her lap to restore it to the tomb, the silence of his eternal resting with the Father. Thus the whole of the divine journey is seen to be wound on two spools, the unfolding of one being an infolding upon the other. And it is the separation of the two spools, which in their deeper reality are one and the same, which makes the divine journey possible and indeed necessary.

We should perhaps note that from the point of view of the external work, from the point of view, that is to say, of creation in its totality, the centre is restored in the twelfth station, our Lord's death on the cross. This indeed is the centre of the universe. About the central point of the cross the whole world spins; and the restoring of the cosmic order was shown in the raising of the cross, where on the ground Jesus was nailed to it, (station eleven) to the upright position—as he said, 'when I shall be lifted up I shall draw all things to myself'.

The twelfth station represents the Atonement. But atonement has three depths of implication represented by the last three stations: to which depths the names may be given: *Reconciliatio*, *Adunatio*, *Indivisio*. The outward reconciliation is concluded with the death of Christ for the same reason that all creation finds its centre there. But beyond the centre of the created universe is the centre within the centre, the nameless depth of the divine reality. Into that depth he returns (never really having departed therefrom) being received first dead into the lap from which he took life.

The significance of the deposition and burial of Christ is wholly inward. The heart of Mary in which he returns to rest is something anterior to all creation, a 'place' where no creature dwells: or if it is creature it is that purity of the created state which means nothing but God and is beyond the cosmic order. If the purity of Mary means nothing but God, in the last station there remains nothing but God of whose ineffable depth no true word can be spoken.

The journey thither from 'the head' represented by the praetorium to 'the heart' which is God's tomb—the only place, as Pascal said, in which Jesus Christ found rest—is the meditation of the stations, a meditation of which, objectively, the effect is to realize what is signified therein. And the meditation, together with the realization which is its deeper counterpart, takes place and is concluded wholly in Christ. It is the way from this saying of his, 'The Father is greater than I' to this other saying, 'I and the Father are one' followed to the end that 'They all may be one as thou Father in me and I in thee'.



PRAY THE ROSARY

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TIME and again we have been urged, as individuals, in our homes, in our schools, and everywhere, to say the Rosary. Surely we must now begin to put the stress on *praying* the Rosary. We are concerned about the very soul of this devotion, and so about the immensely more important part of any Rosary. As the soul is always more important than the body, so too meditation of the Rosary should always have priority over any merely material recitation of the beads. This should be obvious to all. Yet how often do we slip into careless ways of talking. It is very easy for a priest to tell you, 'for your penance, say a decade of the Rosary'. Or, perhaps, two friends may be passing a church, and one will say to the other: 'Let's drop in and say a Rosary. . .'