

MADE HOLY: *We Shall Be Like Him*
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 1 April 2009



The other day Ashley asked me what topic I was supposed to address in this evening's talk, and I said, "I'm going to talk about what happens when you die." And then she said in that encouraging way she has, "How would *you* know?"

Well, how indeed? Who comes back to tell us? But what we are talking about tonight – what we have been talking about one each of these Wednesday evenings in Lent, what we talked about at our parish retreat at Kanuga, and, I hope what we are always talking about in the Church – is the Gospel, the Redemption of our bodies and souls in and through Jesus Christ. Fr. Clarke spoke to us about our need for Redemption: about the personal, cultural, ecological, and cosmic consequences of our rebellion against God's love. Fr. Sanderson spoke to us about God's great redemptive act in Jesus Christ: the atonement accomplished for us on the Cross. At our retreat, Fr. Tobin spoke to us about the living out of that Redemption in the community of the Cross, which is the Church.

Tonight, then, we want to apply this logic of redemption, aided by the Scriptures and 2000 years of the Church's reflection – to apply this logic of redemption to the faithful departed, whose ranks each of us will join sooner or later, should the Lord tarry so long.

So, Redemption is both definitive and progressive. It is definitive in that our redemption has been accomplished for us on the cross by Jesus on a particular Friday afternoon some 2000 or so years ago. That is what Fr. Sanderson talked to us about. And it is definitive in that when we are united to Christ by faith and baptism we become fully, truly, God's own. "Beloved, we are God's children now!" says St. John (1 Jn 3.2).

But, as Fr. Tobin reminded us, redemption has a progressive aspect as well – and we all know this. "Beloved we are God's children now," says St. John, who then goes on to say, "but what we will be has not yet appeared." Redemption is accomplished, but it must be applied. Baptism is not the beginning of a vacation but a battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil – a battle in which we sometimes, often times, falter and fall. Our redemption has to be lived out because we are persons, not robots – nothing is automatic: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling," says St. Paul, "for it is God who is at work within you" (Phil 2.12).

Another way to say this is that salvation includes but is not limited to the forgiveness of our sins; it is also about the transformation of our characters, of our hearts and our wills, so that, as the hymn says, we "may love what thou dost love and do what thou wouldst do" (H 508). I really hate that hymn, but that's a good line.

But of course, there's the rub. We do not do what he does; we do not love what he loves. We are still, this side of the Cross, this side of baptism, this side of the grave and the great judgment seat of Christ, sinners. "*For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing... For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members*" (Rm 7.13-25).

One final way to say this is that we lack internal integrity – the consequence of sin is not just that we are alienated from God and living “east of Eden,” but that we are alienated from and within ourselves. We suffer from dis-integration of our hearts and wills and bodies – they're not all pulling in the same direction. We are conflicted.

“Lord, I believe – help thou my unbelief,” prayed the father of the demon-possessed child (Mk 9.24). “Lord, grant me chastity, but not yet!” prayed St. Augustine. Our hearts conflicted, our souls dis-integrated.

Well, what would integrity – a whole human being – look like? What will we each look like when fully and finally redeemed and saved? We know the answer to that. Each of us, and all the faithful departed, will look – each in our own particular way – like Jesus. That is what God is doing. That is the point and goal of our redemption. So, again St. Paul to the Romans, *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers* (Rm 8.29). The strongest possible language for God's sovereign ordering of history is reserved for this – God's purpose, his sovereign, unwavering, certain purpose that we will be “conformed to the image of Christ” – whole, integrated human beings at one with God's love and will – which is to say, truly free, truly ourselves, truly who God intended us to be so that we may have perfect fellowship and friendship – in fullest, deepest meaning of that word – with God – Father, Son, and Holy Ghost – and with one another in eternity. That is Heaven.

That is what God is doing in us, and it is also, at the same time, what we are to be doing for ourselves. “Be ye not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rm 12.1,2) is a command. That gradual transformation, that progressive aspect of redemption, is generally called in Protestant theology “sanctification” and in Catholic theology “conversion”. And it is a transformation that for most all of us is incomplete when the courses of our earthly lives are finished – which is a gentle way of saying “when we die.”

See – dead people – you knew I'd get there eventually.

Well, you see the rub. Dead, but not yet fully sanctified, our rebellious wills and appetites not yet completely converted. God's own children, but not fully conformed to the image of Christ – not yet fit for that perfect fellowship and friendship with God that is the life of Heaven.

Pope John Paul II pointed out that we see this principle at work in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, which required that what is destined for God be perfect. “Animals blind or disabled or mutilated or having a discharge or an itch or scabs you shall not offer to the Lord” commanded

the law (Lv 22.22). In the same way, physical wholeness and integrity was required of the priests who offered the sacrifices: *“Speak to Aaron, saying, ‘None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. 18 For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, 19 or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, 20 or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or [wait for it!] crushed testicles”* (Lv 21.16-21).

John Paul pointed out that this requirement for physical integrity was intended to be a sign of the inner moral and spiritual and volitional integrity required both of individuals and the Covenant people as whole in their approach to a holy God. “It is a matter” the Pope said, “of loving God with all one’s being, with purity of heart and witness of deed. The need for integrity obviously becomes necessary after death, for entering into perfect and complete communion with God” (General Audience of Wednesday, 4 August 1999).

That’s one side of the problem – we might call it the objective side. Perfect holiness is required for perfect fellowship with a perfectly holy God. “You therefore must be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt 5.48).

But the problem has what we might call a subjective side as well. Not only is holiness required, it is desired. It is what we want, and perhaps one way to measure the progress of our sanctification or the depth of our conversion is to consider to what degree we actually desire holiness and wholeness.

Some of you will be familiar with the Evangelical writer and speaker Joni Erickson Tada. In 1967, when she was 18-yr old, she dove headfirst into shallow water, breaking her neck and becoming a quadriplegic – bound to a wheelchair and unable to use her hands these past forty years. I read Mrs. Tada writing about the resurrection of the body, and the joy and hope that the Easter promise brought her. She wrote that at the Resurrection she would do two things. First, she would fall on her face in worship and adoration before her Savior, and then, she would get up and dance.

Now, that makes sense, doesn’t it? We can understand her deep desire and her joyful expectation of physical wholeness and integrity. In much the same way, Christians desire the wholeness and integrity of our hearts and minds and wills – to love truly and freely and without reservation, to leave behind mixed motives, for appetites and desires to be brought into good order and subject to reason and love – we want our hearts to truly worship and adore and – so to speak – to dance. We long, in our saner moments, for purity, to be rid of anything that would keep us from perfect communion with our loving Father.

As C.S. Lewis wrote,

Would it not break the heart if God said to us, 'It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy'? Should we not reply,

'With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I'd rather be cleaned first' ("The Business of Heaven").

It would be a cruelty for God to resurrect Joni Erickson Tada lame into the new heavens and earth. And it would be a cruelty for God to bring us to himself with scabbed and lame hearts. And God is not cruel.

So, that's the problem of sanctification and the grave in its objective and subjective aspects. For the great majority of us, we are not ready for God's unmediated presence when we die - a final purification is needed and a final purification is desired.

The name that Catholic Christianity has given the answer to that problem is "Purgatory." For many of us, that is a word which will conjure all sorts of images and even horrors drawn from Dante and elsewhere. It will also bring to mind for many of us the terrible abuses in the medieval church which did so much to give rise to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, when often the doctrine of Purgatory was pedaled as a place of unspeakable torture and used to extort money by what amounted to the purchase of indulgences. "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs," rhymed the ecclesiastical extortionist Jonathan Tetzl.

But, in fact - and without denying how this teaching has in the Church's history at times been horribly distorted and abused - the teaching of the Church in this matter is actually pretty slim as to content, though it is filled with great comfort and common sense. So, as large as the idea of Purgatory often looms in our thinking about abuses in the Church and even the Protestant/Catholic divide, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* actually devotes only 3 - out of 2900 - paragraphs, less than one page out of nearly 700, to its teaching about Purgatory. In fact, the Catechism sums up the only three things the Catholic Christianity insists upon with regard to Purgatory.

The first, I hope should be clear from all that has gone before - simply that Purgatory is about purification for heaven (which all Christians - Catholic and Orthodox and Protestant agree is necessary), not about punishment and Hell. Actually, I should be even clearer than that - the Church teaches that Purgatory is Heaven, at least its narthex or doorway or, perhaps, its mudroom. It is part of the process of salvation, the application of redemption - and again, something for which God's friends desire as "the hart longs for the waterbrook" (Ps 42). So Purgatory is forward looking, not backward. It is for those who are being saved, not for those who have chosen their own way.

Secondly, Purgatory may involve some degree of pain and discomfort. This should not be surprising and is, I think, commonsense. Sanctification on this side of the grave involves pain and discomfort - at least in the sense of striving and straining towards the goal and of disciplining the appetites. And also in this sense: it involves necessarily the revelation to ourselves of our own horrifying sinfulness and does so against the backdrop of a much clearer vision of God's holiness and love than we can have in this life. We can perhaps think of this in terms of confession - which is nothing other than being truthful with God about our sin, and, as we know, sometimes

the truth, especially the truth about ourselves, hurts, but it is the necessary precondition for healing and reconciliation. A Puritan theologian called confession “the vomit of the soul” – it’s not pleasant, but it gets the badness out, and we’re glad and relieved to have it out.

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, one of the books in the “Chronicles of Narnia” series, CS Lewis introduces us to a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and, as the narrator says, “he almost deserved it.” Eustace is a pill and a pain, particularly upon finding himself drawn into the magical land of Narnia. Sneaking away from his companions one day, Eustace stumbles into the lair of a recently deceased dragon, filled, as one would suspect, with a dragon’s horde of gold and treasure.

Eustace immediately begins to fill his pockets with treasure and to calculate how he can use these riches to get his own way. Growing tired, he falls asleep atop the mound of treasure only to awaken and find that he has been transformed into a dragon himself. He should have known that would happen, but as the narrator tells us, he “had read none of the right books.” Now of course the riches are of no use to him. And he is a dragon and alone and desolate. But he finds his companions again, and once they realize the dragon is really Eustace, they are kind to him. And, for the first time in his life, Eustace begins to be kind in return. In fact, he begins for the first time to be capable of love and friendship and, though he is a dragon, to act human-ly.

Finally one night the great Lion Aslan comes to Eustace and takes him away to a well, but tells Eustace that before he can wash, he must undress, which Eustace realizes means to remove his dragon skin... Three times Eustace claws away his dragon skin, only to find that there is another layer underneath.

"Then the lion said ...'You will have to let me undress you.' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

"The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know – if you've ever picked the scab off a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh, but it is such fun to see it coming away..."

"Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off – just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt – and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobly-looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me – I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on – and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again."

But if Purgatory must necessarily involve pain, it must also necessarily involve pleasure and joy because it brings us to the Source of pleasure and joy. Indeed, St. Catherine of Genoa insisted that these pleasures must outweigh any pains:

Thus, according as the rust diminishes and the soul is laid bare to the divine rays, happiness is augmented. The one grows and the other wanes until the time of trial is elapsed . . . With regard to the will of these souls, they can never say that these pains are pains, so great is their contentment with the ordinance of God, with which their wills are united in perfect charity (*Treatise on Purgatory*).

And finally, the Church has always believed that just as by God's design and command prayer aids our growth in grace and holiness on this side of the grave, so prayer can aid growth in grace and holiness in Purgatory. How does that work – how do our prayers help? In the same way that any prayer works. God has ordered his world in such a way that our prayers have some effective part in its – and mine and your – unfolding history. As Pascal said, in prayer God “gives us the dignity of causation.”

That we should pray for the dead is inherent in our belief in the communion of saints. Our great Anglo-Catholic progenitor EB Pusey put it this way: “for, unless there were, in the Word of God, an absolute prohibition of prayer for the departed, how should we go on praying for those whom we love until they were out of sight, and then cease on the instant, as if ‘out of sight, out of mind’ were a Christian duty?” (in V. Staley, *The Catholic Religion*).

In the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom encouraged his flock in Constantinople, “Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them” (*Hom. in 1 Cor.* 41,5:PG 61,361; cf. *Job* 1:5).

Love demands that we pray, and the highest prayer of the Church is the Eucharist, when we unite ourselves to Christ's sacrifice. And it is there, in the Mass, that the veil between this world and next is lifted, and we are there before Christ's throne with “Angels and Archangels and the whole company of heaven.” The Communion of Saints is actualized. United with Christ, we are united with one another. Our love and desire and prayer for those we love is lifted up to the Father in the Son's perfect offering of himself on Calvary's cross – and theirs for us.

And so it will be until that great Day when God will bring all of us finally, fully, and forever to Himself. And we will see Christ, and be like him, for we shall see him as he is. In the meantime, with all who hope in him, we purify ourselves, even as he is pure – trusting that God in his mercy and grace will provide for us and for those whom we love whatever is lacking in our sanctification, and that the One who began a good work in us will bring it completion in the Day of Christ.