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Studies in Passionist History and Spirituality

THE PASSION OF CHRIST AND ITS POWER

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THE PASSION OF CHRIST AND ITS POWER

I INTRODUCTION

To begin with, I would admit to a very real hesitation, indeed to a certain sense of tiredness, in taking up again yet one more time a body of texts which you have so often read, taught, and, above all, meditated on.

On various occasions, I myself have tried to focus on this difficult concept, conscious in my own way of the treasure, or as St. Paul of the Cross would say, “the immense ocean,” contained therein.

In itself, this vast potential can as easily either encourage us to attempt the impossible, or lead us to become very discouraged or lazy. While avoiding as far as possible the presumption and boredom of a compulsive repetition, I do not pretend to offer you anything new, whether it be of the Scriptures or any other source.

In this sense, “there is nothing new under the sun,” to repeat the well-known phrase from Quothelth, who did in fact believe that everything does endlessly repeat itself, and that it is precisely this which is at the root of much of the boredom of life.

What is new today – and obviously I am not speaking of the daily news we receive through the media – comes to us through the continuous and constantly unsettling findings of science and modern technology. But these novelties, in their turn, come and go so quickly that we lose all sense of surprise. Once it becomes part of everyone’s daily living, the expected miracle leads to indifference. And it is a fact that the people of our modern world would seem to become bored much more readily than our forefathers, whom we could certainly not call “blasé.”

Might we say the same of things religious and spiritual which also run the risk of leading to indifference and condemning us to a kind of profound boredom, a generalized insipidness that St. Thomas, amongst others, called *acedia*, betrayal: that “tepidity” of the Apocalypse with which St. John reproaches the leader of the Church of Laodicea: “you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot.” For tepidity brings on nausea.

However, we cannot but think of the frequency with which the word “new” appears in the Gospels and in the other texts of the New Testament, to such an extent that a theologian whom I know well (Vahania) was able to build his theology on the noun “Novum,” the “new” par excellence.

One wonders if the remedy to the universal boredom which seems to be so deep-seated in our Western world of continually multiplying novelties would be to forget (thus also removing the source of fleeting distractions) this noun “Novum”, perhaps the only thing capable of disturbing us at a deep level, since it has nothing to do with the pleasure of satisfying our curiosity.

These modest reflections should be considered in conjunction with the Pauline imperative: “wake up,” “stand up.” We should note that the Greek verbs used by Paul in the imperative

mood are also the two verbs he uses in the indicative mood to express and affirm the Resurrection of Christ. This is not without significance for our purpose as regards the power of the Cross, and its “Novum” which should wake us up and keep us on our feet so as to respond to its absolute demand.

II THE CROSS: A POWER TO DRAW AND TO AWAKEN

1. As a preliminary and for clarity of presentation, I will take up again the distinction that I proposed in another work, the distinction between the Passion and the Cross. I was led to it by the terminology of St Paul, who speaks of the “dunamis staurou” and not of the “dunamis” of the Passion. Therefore by the Passion I mean “that series of events commemorated in the liturgy of Holy Week,” without dissociating them from the narrative text of the four Gospels, which present the Passion with that lively suppleness recalled for us the other day by Johann Sebastian Bach’s “The Passion according to St. John.”

The Cross, if we are in agreement as to its specific purpose, would be the meaning, the spirit, the breath which gives life to all these events, since it is nothing other than the Gospel itself, in its human-divine form; it is the Cross which recapitulates every paradox: the Beatitudes, the miracles, unconditional service, love unto death – in short, the forgetting of self in the fervor of self-giving.

Such would be the two sides, positive and negative, of the definition of the Cross as the spirit or breath of the Passion.

I will dwell at length on this later. Here I would simply add that these are also the two constitutive elements of Christian liberty, as Paul teaches his communities in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus.

Therefore, let us draw up the following provisional approach to our subject:

Passion→power of the Cross→newness-->liberty

Such would be the semantic complex upon which we would do well to reflect together, with each one being required to offer his or her own personal contribution, since each of us is, in the eyes of God, a “hapax,” a unique “said and done,” who, in the anonymity of daily life, has still to speak that unique word, to take that unparalleled initiative – in other words, a “novum” which in its own way echoes the original, in the power of the Cross.

All the more should this be so in that our title as Passionists commits us, in virtue of our very name, to act in such a way. Apropos of this, and without entering into an interminable argument, I would point out that n. 65 of our Rule stresses the need, on a personal level, for such a response – but in language which leaves me somewhat baffled. The paragraph reads as follows: “our vocation obliges us to become competent in the knowledge of the Passion of Christ and the passion of mankind – which together constitute one unique mystery of salvation.” I have deliberately underlined the two words “competent” and “knowledge.”

This surprises me because competence, which is required today in every profession from the shoemaker or the farmer to the research worker at the Pasteur Institute, seems somewhat out of place here. What might it mean to be competent in or to have a doctorate in the Passion or the power of the Cross of Christ?

That competence which is associated with knowledge might very well be that of an unbeliever who could as readily treat the Passion, in an objective sense, as being a problem as much of history or psychology as of theology. Remember all the “competence” gathered around the Shroud of Turin.

Believe me, I am not raising an idle question. That is why I even question myself. In linguistics competence is defined as “the system of rules interiorized by the speaking subjects which constitute their linguistic knowledge, through which they are able to pronounce or understand an infinity of phrases.”

Here, competence is no longer part of a more or less refined scientific or technological discipline. It is, very simply, the ability of all of us to speak our native language and to hear what is said to us.

But when Paul declares that he knows nothing else but Christ Crucified, would we say that he is competent, able to speak of it properly? That really would be odd.

It seems to me that there is something of greater importance here, something which leads us neither into obscurantism nor the bliss of unadulterated ignorance.

What we have here is a way of knowing, the nature of which is different from that which we have so far been considering. To know, in the Biblical and New Testament sense, is certainly more than the set of interiorized rules that allow us to speak the language of the Cross correctly and to understand it. I would add at once that this ability to speak and understand the language of the Cross is certainly not something to be neglected. It is a language learned and understood firstly through the New and the Old Testaments, then through the tradition of the Fathers, the liturgy (the liturgy of Holy Week), and through spiritual experience as expressed by, for example, St. Paul of the Cross. Clearly, all of this is necessary, and yet it cannot be sufficient.

I am not saying here that all those who write or have written on the Passion or, more generally, on spirituality, should automatically be, as it were, spiritual or devout people. However, I do not think that the Cross can be approached as an object or a problem suitable for consideration from the perspective of a disinterested observer. Over and above that competence which undoubtedly is necessary, I believe it is essential that there should be an attraction which precedes it, something in the nature of a magnetism or powerful appeal which draws us towards a center; in other words, a preliminary dynamic which makes, our understanding of a certain language possible, makes us competent in that language. And it is precisely here that the power of the Cross is in the first place to be found, as the Gospel tells us: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all things to myself.”

It is this power of attraction, this primary manifestation of the “*dunamis staurou*” of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians, which should be the basis of our competence.

Therefore a word needs to be said on what is meant by this, in order to clarify it.

a) I would say, first of all, that it is a question of a prerequisite which exerts a kind of attraction over us and of which we are, as it were, the joyful recipients.

The verb “to suffer” (in French “patir”), from which we derive the words “patient” and “passion,” has a number of meanings which we would do well to distinguish.

First of all there is suffering in the sense of a change which disturbs us, and initially diminishes us. We find an echo of this in the “naked suffering” of Paul of the Cross; in the “secret wound” spoken about by John of the Cross and both the great Teresa and Therese of Lisieux – a wound in which they rejoiced as in a great grace, and from which they hoped never to be delivered, even in heaven.

The second meaning, noted by St. Thomas and more neutral than the first, simply indicates any kind of movement from one state to another.

In a third sense, suffering implies not just a change of no particular significance, but rather an enrichment of the person in and for himself, who through being strengthened, grows towards a perfection which, although received as gift, in fact responds to his deepest desires.

b) Now the first and the third of these meanings can fittingly be applied to that suffering of an “attraction” which draws us to itself, and effects in us what is at one and the same time a wound of weakness and an opening up to the unknown, a “novum” which is both magnificent and unnerving.

Such would be, if I have understood it correctly, that “fragility of belief” of which M. de Certeau spoke. “Fragility of belief” in the power of the Cross, weakness and folly, in which are hidden the greatest wisdom and the greatest strength.

c) In this way, that initial attraction which warns us of its seductiveness, produces in us a “creative emotion,” in Bergson’s sense of the term, because, under the form of an apparent passivity of being “one who is loved and desired,” it liberates in the one who is touched by it unsuspected energies capable of transforming radically our way of acting and thinking.

d) Thus it is not a matter of sensible, childish and passing delights which, being experienced in the flesh as well as in the soul, would console us amidst the sufferings of this present life and help us to bear them.

e) The “victorious delight” of which we are speaking, inseparable as it is from a concomitant mortification, also becomes the energy (I will come back to that word in the New Testament) which produces a deep sensitivity which, in turn, is the principle of transformation in every sense.

f) To be more precise, I would add this as a further explanation: in those who are touched by it, this power-attraction of the Cross is experienced as something which ought to be, which has to

be, and which, for this reason, releases in us the effective means of its realization “in the land of the living.”

g) In this sense, it is indistinguishable from what we used to call, with Plato, enthusiasm; enthusiasm of which the “fools for Christ,” both in the East and in the West, were the most striking witnesses.

And if we think of its etymology, enthusiasm means both the soul’s being in God and God’s being in the soul. A reciprocity which expresses admirably the attractive power of the Cross of Christ.

h) As a slight digression, I would also simply say this: abstracting from what has just been said about the Cross, I willingly acknowledge that the “magnetism” and enthusiasm exercised by an “attractive power” can occur in areas that are foreign to it. Whether it be science as we understand it today, or philosophy or theology, I think we can apply the descriptive schema which I proposed. In these different disciplines competence, necessary though it may be, is also rooted in the preliminary attraction and enthusiasm which transforms the object or problem in question, giving it a quasi-axiomatic dignity which makes it worthy of pursuit, and thus generating in the one who experiences this great love both the obligation and the potential to respond. Here again, the “fragility of belief” generates the energy for a thought-action.

Perhaps the most disturbing characteristic of our time is that lack of any motivating factor capable of giving new life to the young, of filling them with enthusiasm, as Plato understood it. Enough said.

III THE TERMINOLOGY OF POWER IN THE BIBLE

1. I am not forgetting that it is not power-attraction alone which is at issue in our Judeo-Christian writings. In order to avoid all sectarianism, it would be important to pay attention, without being exclusive, to that semantic pluralism which is inherent not only in the more important terms of a particular lexicon, but more generally to every word of whatever vocabulary. But I cannot dwell on this particular point here.

2. Without lingering too long, I would just like to say a word on what we used to call “passive power.” Since the word “passive” has a somewhat negative connotation, we would do better, in relation to our particular subject, to call it that power of acceptance or openness, to which I referred earlier.

This power-attitude of openness is of no little importance. We would do well to remember here the parable of the sower and the seed – the various kinds of ground on which the seed fell and the differing outcomes according to the quality of their receptivity. In other words, what matters is willingness to hear the word of the Cross. Here I would bring in the theological doctrine of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly according to St. Thomas, who likens them to poetic inspiration.

He describes them as “perfections through which man is disposed to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit” in receiving his breath, like those sailing boats designed to respond sensitively to the slightest breeze. There must be present in the soul perfections of a higher order than our purely human mode of action, which open it up to the divine and enable it literally to “be moved divinely” (“ad hoc quod divinitus moveatur”) and to “respond promptly to divine inspiration.” The history of spirituality tells of those who have been inspired by the Cross in such a way, such as Francis of Assisi, and who have realized perfectly that definition of the gifts of the Spirit, which St. Thomas does not separate from the Beatitudes and the fruits of the Holy Spirit listed in Galatians 5, 22-23, among which are joy and peace. In this sense, more so than in philosophy or science, “competence in the power of the Cross” can come about only through a certain joyful fervor.

3. In the Bible, power is most often spoken about in its active sense. And it would be agreed that power, thus understood, is an “essential attribute of the divinity,” which the various religions have made use of in ways well known to us. Here I would recall in passing, and I will come back to it later, that in 1 Corinthians 2,1, Paul distinguishes the religions of his day according to whether the stress is on wisdom, in the case of the Greeks, or on signs of power, for Israel This power of signs demanded by the Jews, as against the wisdom sought by the Greeks, is the dominant feature of the whole history of Israel – the chosen people, set apart, whose entire existence seems to have depended on the exceptional.

These exceptions we call “miracles” because they arouse admiration. But we would do better to refer to them as “signs” because they inscribe on the things themselves a sense of divine finality, intrinsic to their being, much as an imperative or a kind of predestination. “The strong one of Israel” and “the powerful one of Jacob” – here we have two expressions which state clearly that unique relationship which binds a unique people to its unique God, the warrior-chief of his people whom he leads in battle, whom he supports in their trials, and whose strength he remains throughout their tormented history.

4. In the later description of the creation which we read in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis, the contrast already so clearly drawn in the events of history between the powerless gods and the one true God, is confirmed in the cosmic universality of its consequences.

In reality, the power of the “strong one of Israel” is historically weak only if he disposes, in perfect mastery and by right of creation, of a universe of which the heavens sing the glory. The land of Israel is henceforth at the center of this universe.

Likewise, and through an analogous flashback, the Jewish exclusiveness as a people embodies the universality of the original human being, created in the image and likeness of God. By this double reference, which universalizes a people and its territory, Israel becomes responsible for the very existence of its God in this world, as conversely, its God takes on the responsibility for his chosen people.

This history, of which the world of nature is the theater, is not at rest, as we well know. Sometimes the shadows seem to dominate to such an extent that, as we see in the book of Job, the problem of Evil becomes the primary concern, particularly in the form of the persecuted just one. This can also be seen in Plato’s “Republic,” which dates from about the same time.

This is the eternal problem that calls into question the most commonly-accepted attributes of the divinity: power, goodness, wisdom. But Evil, as it is presented in the New Testament writings (the Gospels, the Pauline corpus, the Acts of the Apostles), is not just a deprivation by way of deficient causality, such as the limp of a defective leg. Evil is, above all, a terrible power, summed up in the name Satan, the Obstacle which seems to be more than an obstacle, or the simple hostile personification in a bad angel of all the evils that afflict humanity.

In reality, this universal power of Evil is, as described in the Gospel, as numerous as “legion.” “I am legion,” says the devil. The evil or demoniacal powers form an army, sometimes identified with the forces of nature, particularly with the stars. Sickness itself is the effect of the devil or of the sin that he inspires. For Paul, sin in its turn is a power, and so is death. From this flows a theology of dark powers, not to be confused with the oriental theology of “powers” (dunamis) of which Western theology has made the “divine attributes.”

It is in opposition to these evil powers that the ministry of Christ affirms his divine mission, especially in the miracles of healing. The following diagram gives an overall view of power as it is presented in the Bible.

POWER		
Divine Power Spirit of God	The Miracles of the Covenant	Liberation Healing
	The Spirit	Conversion of Hearts
Demoniacal powers. Spirit or forces	Evil and Evils (Job)	
	Sin and Death	

IV POWER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is immersed in the same atmosphere. At least if we study it in its entirety.

- The powers of Evil, to which Jesus is opposed, are also active there, especially in the form of sickness and possessions. In this sense, the power of miracles, of which Israel was the beneficiary, continues to manifest itself.
- The miracles also appear as signs of divine mercy. As far as I know, there are no purely sensational miracles, worked to show the athletic performances of the Almighty.

Through them, Jesus inaugurates the new Kingdom. Note in passing that Matthew (11,20) calls them “powers.” It can be said of them, as will later be said of the sacraments, that they bring about what they signify, namely the messianic salvation – they effect what they signify, and

they signify what they effect. Intended for the liberation of those who benefit from it, the miracle-sign is at the service of liberty – to make it a reality.

To conclude these two paragraphs, I would like to make three remarks concerning the “powers” and “power” in the New Testament.

a) Although they are important, the miracle-signs, which Jesus never disclaims, are certainly never to be understood as ends in themselves, neither should they be overestimated, even as true signs. For they always make a strong impression on the senses, and faith must be, above all, the mortification of what is apprehended by the senses. “Because you have seen me, Thomas, you believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (Jn. 20,29). “The one who believes in me will do greater works than I have done” (3n.14,12). Therefore, faith in the word of Christ is more important than the ability to perceive signs.

b) Concerning evil powers, and sin in particular, Jesus warns us against overestimating their causality. When he cured the man born blind, in answer to the Apostles’ question: “Master, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?,” Jesus answers: “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him” (Jn. 9,3-4).

c) My third remark concerns the power of the Spirit which is omnipresent in the New Testament, in Paul’s writings, and especially in John. True, the power of the Spirit was not absent in the “first covenant.” We need only read the prophets, particularly Ezekiel. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the frequent reference to the Spirit is intimately connected with ‘the interiorization of the Word, strikingly highlighted in John.

V THE POWER OF THE CROSS

1. The three remarks that I have just made introduce us to a reflection on this extraordinary Power of the Cross which impressed St. Paul so strongly (1 Cor. 1,1).

With the Cross, in fact, we could say that the “sign-miracles,” evidence of the visible, have a less prominent characteristic which subordinates them to the “sign of contradiction.”

The “demand for signs” which defines the Jewish distinctiveness in 1 Cor. 1, as opposed to the typically Greek search for wisdom (1 Cor. 1, 21-23), is followed immediately by the “as for us” which is the dividing point that makes the difference irreversible.

The one faithful to the Cross does not ask for signs. Henceforth, the signs produced for each one will be more subdued, less striking, but they will be no less signs of faith for the liberation of those who suffer. Their originality will lie in the fact that their object is Christ himself, present in his mysterious “I” of distress, in the least of his brothers.

2. In its power, the Spirit of the Cross thus fulfills the evangelical signs. Because they are worked for Christ present in the most deprived of his brothers, their origin is faith in this presence of Christ, and their goal is the realization of Christ himself in humanity, through the most ordinary actions as listed in the account of the last judgement.

3. As for the powers of evil, they are always present. But perhaps, after Christ's answer to the disciples's question about the man born blind, we would not so readily identify them with that perversity of will which is sin. This does not mean that the evil we suffer is totally exempt from the designs of evil wills. But Jesus' warning is a lesson for us.

4. We must now, without fear of confronting it, consider the more general problem of power, as it appears in the light of the Cross.

Here we seem to be dealing with a reversal of all that is most widely accepted. For through the sign of the Cross it is a completely different idea of God which emerges, one of weakness and folly. The Greek terms used are not just surprising but scandalous, as Paul himself says. I would translate them: "what is foolishness of God or in God and what is weakness of God." The Messiah on the Cross is, therefore, the decisive Word on God, a Word more eloquent than any discourse, which tells us less about what God is than about what God is not. Thus the two major attributes, power and wisdom, stressed by the two great religious cultures, Judaism and Hellenism, both known to Paul, seem to lose the impressive power that was attributed to them; as if God could reveal himself to us, in his Christ, only under the aspects of a nothingness, a non-being.

A scandal, a paradox indeed. The true image, the icon of the Most High, is henceforth Christ crucified become foolishness and weakness, who incarnates on earth the weak and foolish God in whose image and likeness he has been made what he is.

And yet the paradox goes still further, for the "foolishness of God" is wiser than the wisdom of men, and the "weakness of God" is more powerful than men (or that of men). How can we understand this new paradox?

5. If man (man-woman) is the image of God, ought it to be said, in order to be faithful to both the first chapter of Genesis and the message of the Cross, that this image is twofold? One, in the likeness of the creating God, answers to the imperative of power and domination ("be master over the fish..." – over the universe), while the other, the image in the soul of the Cross of Christ, expresses the divine weakness and folly of the Cross, the negation of all those qualities which would classically be termed divine.

The first speaks to us of the joy of the power of creation: the conquest of the world through knowledge and action, in the image of God the creator.

The second is the power of drawing back, of standing at a distance from the first (a stauological image). Which of the two is most fundamental? The second or the first? And if, being faithful to the Cross, we choose the second, considering it to be more radical, what concept of God goes with it? A critical concept, undermining our most commonly held ideas about God, it tells us that God is beyond our ideas of him, that he is in no way what we take "being" and "perfection" to be. He is "Nothingness par excellence," according to that daring medieval expression. Indeed, it is to just such a paradoxical concept that the folly and weakness of the Cross lead us. And we must add that this "Nothing par excellence" is more powerful than the power of men, wiser than their wisdom. Of this nothing "in excess" we could say: he is the first

power, the first love, who gives what he is not and what he has not, precisely so that man and the world might have that twofold image we have discussed.

VI COROLLARY

To approach this paradox in a somewhat less abrupt way, I will refer to certain texts of the present and the past, which may shed some light on it.

1. We have often recalled that the human being, “the little man,” as opposed to the animal who is equipped at birth with everything he needs for survival, is an “instinctual desert”; starting with nothing, he must, through education, acquire everything he will become. Hence the expression: Nothing-All, Nada-Todo, which often crops up in various texts of philosophy or spirituality.

2. Saint Thomas, commenting on Aristotle, points out that the human soul has no nature but that, through knowledge, it becomes every nature in the universe.

3. In a sermon, Meister Eckhart ventures to say that God is nothing less than the necessity to go beyond, not stopping at any of his names, and it is because he has no single name, being unnameable, that he becomes all-nameable. We can see the Nothing-All relationship in these three points.

4. To conclude, I would therefore say that the power of the Cross takes various forms which express its influence.

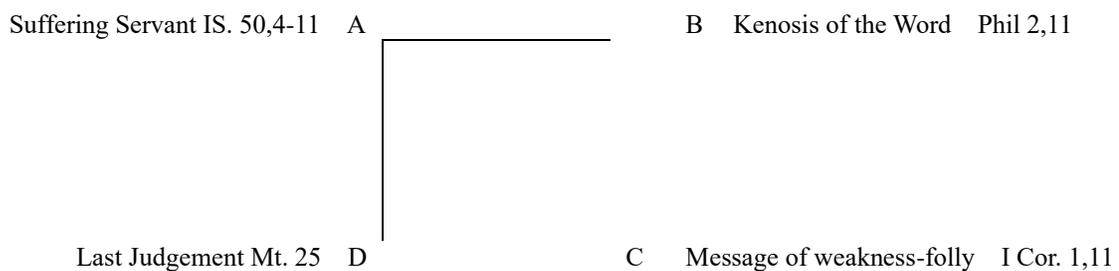
- A Power of attraction
“When I am lifted up, I will draw all things to myself” (cf. what was said above).
- A Power of example
Cf. Phil. 2,1:..”Have in you that mind which was in Christ Jesus.”
- A Norm of action
“Whatever you did to the least of these my brothers, you did to me.”
- An Insight into the misfortunes of mankind, which makes us see in these least ones, the hidden “I” who dwells in them.
- A Force which inspires an activity which transforms, sustaining its dynamism and giving it a more than human motivation.
- but also A Force for detachment, for critical judgement, which invites us to a forgetfulness of self (“do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing”), and to distancing ourselves from the work of our own hands.

5. As can be seen, this power is clearly of value to each one of us, in that it is able to draw our life together around a center which prevents us from being pulled apart. As was noted above, each one relates to the Cross in his or her own way:

by being in the cleft of the rock, as Paul of the Cross would say;

by being in it, yes, but in order truly to live there by developing a spiritual sense of what it is saying to us, through courageous reflection on a personal choice of texts which become for us so many places in which we are glad to find ourselves and to dwell, and to which we constantly return.

To find ourselves in these texts, I would suggest a kind of reading schema, which is as much a network of relationships between the texts as the basis for making them one's own. I would sketch this schema as a "staurological" square, which draws together what seems to me to be the essential elements of the staurology or the Theologia Crucis:



This square, about which there is nothing magical, symbolizes movements linking the texts, in whatever order they are read and at whatever point one starts. The Suffering Servant anticipates the Kenosis of Christ, which incarnates the message of foolishness/weakness, and culminates in the last judgement. The texts can be read in pairs, or all four together; or each one can be taken separately, but without forgetting the whole of which it is a part.

BRIEF COMMENTARY ON THE "STAUROLOGICAL" SQUARE

1. Taking the "cardinal" points one after the other, we can see that each one implies the other three. For example:

A – B plus C plus D, and likewise for each one.

2. The diagonal lines link A to C and D to B and vice versa.

3. Therefore, whatever the starting point, any partial reading should restore the whole.

4. The Suffering Servant, through his "Kenotic" characteristics so clearly described in Isaiah, (without human form, enduring insults, spitting and humiliation, suffering in expiation) – "it is our sufferings and iniquities that he took upon himself" – refers almost self-evidently to the kenosis of the Word in Phil. 2:11. But it is also linked to the "little ones," to those who are nothing, in whom the mysterious "I" of Christ dwells; and also to the foolishness/weakness of the message. The same observations apply to all the other points of the square. But I acknowledge that each one has the right to choose his or her own starting point. The fact

remains, however, that this square is the place in which we are, in which we dwell, and to which we always return.

5. As regards our relationship with others, let me simply point out that:

- a) it clarifies the way we look at them.
- b) it offers an example and a norm for our way of acting, and a motivation which spurs on our efforts.

VII SOME QUESTIONS

Those questions which arise from a necessarily partial presentation in order to develop it further, are left to the individual to pursue. Those foreseen here are not in any sense exhaustive. I propose them simply because they seem to be the most likely ones in the circumstances. I would group them under three headings:

- The relationship between Passion-Cross and Resurrection.
- Suffering in God and the Cross in the Trinitarian mystery.
- Transforming action in the service of the poor and contemplation of the Lord on the Cross.

A. PASSION - RESURRECTION

1. These must be seen as essentially reciprocal.
2. The Resurrection is the fruit of the power of the Cross, just as the Cross is the foundation for the Resurrection.
3. Hence the exaltation of suffering for its own sake should be rejected, but also, by the same token, any one-sidedness which would seek to wipe out the memory of Good Friday in the glory of the Risen One, who does in fact still bear in his hands the glorified wounds of his Passion.

B. SUFFERING IN GOD

1. This is a recent problem in Catholic theology, interest in it seemingly having arisen as a result of the influence of Reformed theology.
2. The fundamental assertion, justified it seems by texts from both the Old and New Testaments, is twofold:
 - In contrast to divine impossibility and immutability, a questionable heritage from Hellenism, the Judeo-Christian God, the God of Mercy, is capable of suffering and sadness, and in his very transcendence authenticates the analogy of the Passion of Christ.
 - This "Passion," this naked suffering, is essentially linked to Agape-Love. For we cannot conceive of a love which would not in some sense be the suffering of a wound, of a

limitation, for without these, that immense generosity which is creation would not be possible.

3. That is why, to the degree that the Suffering Christ is the icon, the radiance of the “divine substance,” there must be in God an analogue which is the foundation of this icon. In other words, there is in God the equivalent of Christ’s Passion and Cross.

For example, in the Father-Son relationship, there would already be, at the Trinitarian level, a mysterious separation which would call to mind the abandonment of Christ on the Cross; a kind of tearing apart which creation prolongs, and which the Spirit, as love, can only promote.

4. I would suggest you read the article on Kenosis by P. Henry in the Supplement de la Bible. Among the many interpretations of Kenosis it contains, we find more than one forerunner of the contemporary theology of suffering in God. In this sense, this theology can be related to the Kenosis hymn in Philippians, as regards at least some of the exegesis suggested there. It is not possible to summarize them here. However, I do think it is imprudent to quote, as do some Catholic theologians, such texts as Hegel or Schelling on the “diremption” or the “rending” of the Absolute. Closer to our approach would be that of Jean Grosjean (ARRAMEENES, CERF, PARIS 1989).

The preliminary problem is that of knowing which trinitarian theology has been adopted: ontological or “economic” (functional).

For Saint Thomas, who strongly maintains the impossibility of any change in God caused by suffering or sorrow, it is clear that, no matter how subtle it may be, the placing in God of an affection of “sorrow,” of “being rent, or torn apart,” of suffering love detracts from the divine eminence. For those who accept this teaching and can claim the authority not only of the Old Testament texts, but also, and above all, of the Pauline texts on the Cross, or of the quartet in my schema, the problem is knowing just what the nature of this suffering is, and whether its very eminence does not risk emptying it of meaning. Maritain made an effort to respond to this. But I am not convinced by his comparison of suffering, understood in the first sense Saint Thomas gives (cf. above), to a transcendental, having the same right as the others to be found in God. Limiting ourselves to the minimum; what is essential is to maintain in God everything that is suggested by the expression “entrails of mercy,” for it is, I think, this “affect” of mercy-love which, according to our theologians, would justify the rejection of an onto-theology of divine impossibility.

I recognize that when linked with Agape-love, the “staurological” texts in Saint Paul (on the weakness of God and his divine foolishness) suggest a transposition of their pathos which would affect God himself with an “alienation” through love (on this, St. Thomas takes up Denys’ expression which he transcribes as “extasim patiens”) and a wonderful weakness, the wound and opening up of a creative generosity.

Hence it is possible, taking the text 1 Cor. 1, to see in God a sublimation of what to us would seem to be need, imperfection, shortcoming, and to see in “foolishness” a wisdom higher than all wisdom, and in weakness a strength greater than all strength. But it is also possible to understand these superlatives in a negative sense and interpret them as the need to think about God in some

other way without imposing on him either our imperfections or our perfections. It is in this sense that I, for my part, would put forward a negative theology of these staurological texts.

C. ACTION CONTEMPLATION

1. Let us note first of all that the distinction between active and contemplative life has given rise, as we know, to a subsequent classification of religious orders into three groups, according to their dominant specificity: contemplative, active and mixed. There is no doubt that the Passionist Congregation emerged in this third category of the mixed life. Moreover, St. Thomas explains at great length why this last group is the best. Human life being divided, according to the modes of the intellect, into the speculative and the practical – the first, fixed on truth in and for itself; and the second, turned towards an external action – it is clear that contemplation by the intellect, animated by charity because it centers on the divine truth “God in all,” is in first place, as is God himself. In this sense, the contemplative life is the best because the intellect is that which is most noble in the human being, and because the moral virtues dispose a person to contemplation but are not contemplation itself.

This supreme nobility in the human being has as its correlative the supreme nobility in the ontological order, namely God.

2. In fact things are more complex. If there are only two main kinds of life (contemplative and active), there is also in the spiritual order a state of perfection to which all the other states are ordained, which is designated in general as charity.

This also is divided into two kinds: the episcopal state or state of the perfect, and the religious state of perfection yet to be attained. In the final analysis, the perfection of religious orders is no longer classified according to the distinction between the active life and the contemplative life, but on how closely they approximate to the episcopal state, which is the state of the perfect.

Having asserted this, I can now state that the differences between the orders is in function:

1. principally, of the end they pursue,
2. secondarily, of the more or less prudent means used to achieve that purpose. St. Thomas affirms: “an order which has a more excellent purpose, whether it be ordained to a greater good or to a greater number of goods, will be superior to an order that does not have that purpose. If two orders have the same purpose, the primacy will go to the one that uses the best means to achieve that purpose, even though they are not necessarily the most ascetical means.”

So, is it the active or the contemplative? And the response: “opus vitae activae est duplex: unum quidem quod ex plenitudine contemplationis derivatur sicut doctrina et praedicatio, et hoc praefertur simplici contemplationi; sicut est majus illuminare quam solum lucem videre, ita majus est contemplata aliis tradere quam solum contemplari.”¹

3. Given these conditions, it is clear that, for St. Thomas, the Dominican Order is the most perfect since, by being a teaching and preaching order, it allows the light of contemplation to

overflow in the enlightening of others. Moreover, by the wisdom and discretion of its statutes, as well as by the diversity of activities and goods, it belongs in a supreme degree to this category. It is the nearest to the episcopal state of perfection. We might even say that it is the Dominican Order which constitutes the mean, the dynamic Median Term, which unites the two extremes: the episcopal state of perfection and the potential (religious) state of perfection. It is not the lifeless, unstable reflection of the extremes which it unites, but rather the far more superior unity, the median and mediator which combines their respective excellences.

4. Thus, the distinction: active life, contemplative life, seen from this sublime, Thomistic, Dominican vantage point, seems merely to be the unfortunate division of something anterior both by nature and by excellence.

So what is left of the brutal distinction between contemplation and action which St. Thomas, referring to St. Augustine, read into the Gospel episode of the two sisters?

I recall the text for you: “In principio erat verbum: ecce quod Maria audiebat. Verbum caro factum est: ecce cui Martha ministrabat.”²

St. Thomas, commenting on Augustine, writes: “Vita contemplativa est secundum divina. Vita autem activa secundum humana.”³

Such is the ultimate reason for positing the excellence of contemplation as superior to the active life. Admittedly, on this point, St. Thomas is more faithful to Aristotle in his *Lambda* of *Metaphysics* than to the mystery of the Incarnation.

Basically, when through a sort of tacit disavowal, he ranks the purely contemplative life second to the active life in which contemplation overflows in the service of others, he justifies the superiority of the latter over contemplation alone by a quasi-axiom: “majus est illuminare quam lucem solum videre.” Then he refers to the mystery of the Incarnate Word: that light which enlightens every one who comes into this world, he who is the true icon-image of the Divine Absolute in his ecstatic, creative, incarnate munificence.

5. HENCE THE FOLLOWING CONCLUSIONS

- a) The distinction “active life/contemplative life” is a false alternative.
- b) Authentic spiritual life only comes about through contemplation which overflows into action.
- c) That is to say, in reference to the Incarnation itself which is
- d) the only authentic image and direct expression of the divine mystery.
- e) This is the basic relationship: God in Christ and Christ in God, upon which we carry out deadly vivisections which divide into separate solid entities, substance on the one hand (God in himself: in principio Verbum) and the loving expression thereof (Verbum Incarnatum).

- f) As far as we are concerned, I believe that it would be as misleading to limit ourselves to the contemplation of the Cross as it would be to see the cross simply in terms of the dictates of human justice. It is the Thomistic unity of the light which is seen and which enlightens, that constitutes the greater imperative.

Finally, as a last conclusion, I would simply say this: the staurological square, in which I illustrated our Passionist a priori perception, sums up what the ideal active life should be, namely, that life in which, as St. Thomas teaches, the vision of the light is joined with the outpouring of its illumination in the service of one another and of all.

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summ. Theol.* 2a2ae, 188, 6, resp., “The work of the active life is twofold: one proceeds from the fullness of contemplation, such as teaching and preaching, and this is preferred to simple contemplation; for just as it is better to illumine than merely to shine, so it is better to give to others the things contemplated than simply to contemplate.”

² St. Augustine, *Sermones ad populum*, serm. 104,2. PL 38, 617. “In the beginning was the Word; this is the one Mary heard. And the Word was made flesh; this is the one Martha served.”

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summ. Theol.* 2a2ae, 182,1, resp. 7. “The contemplative life is concerned with divine things; the active life is concerned with human affairs.”